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RESEARCH ARTICLE / ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ

## The People's Republic of China's Strategy in The Three Sea Domain: The East China Sea, South China Sea, Indian Ocean, and The US's Struggle for Presence in This Region

Çin Halk Cumhuriyeti'nin, Doğu Çin Denizi, Güney Çin Denizi ile Hint Okyanusundaki Stratejisi ve ABD'nin Bölgedeki Varlık Mücadelesi

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### Abstract

China is consolidating its presence in the region through strategies it is implementing in the East China Sea, the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. These strategies ensure the distant defense of its homeland and challenge the United States' struggle for dominance in these three maritime areas. China is implementing the "Active Strategic Counter Attack Against Exterior Lines (ASCEL) Concept" in the East China Sea, which is the first region of these maritime areas. Second, China is developing its retaliatory capabilities in the South China Sea. Third, in the Indian Ocean; China is investing heavily in military technology and in the ports of some of the states with which it has close relations in the region to use them as a support area. In this study, qualitative research techniques are used to analyze China's activities in the East China Sea, South China Sea and Indian Ocean where China has implemented a three-region maritime strategy. This study aims to evaluate the PRC's practices in the Indo-Pacific Region against the United States' efforts to exist in the region and the policies of the two countries in the three maritime areas where both countries confront each other in a way that could lead to a hot conflict by utilizing document analysis, content analysis and discourse analysis methods.

**Keywords:** People's Republic of China, East China Sea, South China Sea, Indian Ocean, Naval Strategy

### Öz

Çin Halk Cumhuriyeti (ÇHC)'nin, Doğu Çin Denizi, Güney Çin Denizi ile Hint Okyanusu'nda uyguladığı stratejilerle, bölgede varlığını pekiştirmekte, anayurdunun uzak savunmasını sağlamakta ve bahse konu üç deniz alanında Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nin hakimiyet mücadelesine meydan okumaktadır. ÇHC, bahse konu deniz alanlarının; ilk bölgesi olan Doğu Çin Denizi'nde "Dış Hatlarda Aktif Stratejik Karşı Saldırıları Konseptini" uygulamakta, Güney Çin Denizi'nde, misilleme yeteneklerini geliştirmekte ve Hint Okyanusunu bölgede yakın ilişki kurduğu bazı devletlerin limanlarına ve askerî teknolojiye yoğun yatırımlar yaparak, bir destek alanı olarak kullanmak amacındadır. Bu çalışmada, nitel araştırma teknikleri kullanılarak ÇHC'nin; Doğu Çin Denizi, Güney Çin Denizi ve Hint Okyanusu'nda üç bölgesel deniz stratejisini, uluslararası literatürde Hint-Pasifik alanı olarak da adlandırılan bölgede Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nin var olma çabalarını ve bu kapsamda her iki ülkenin sıcak bir çatışmaya varacak biçimde karşı karşıya geldiği söz konusu deniz alanlarındaki politikalarını doküman analizi, içerik analizi, söylem analizi yöntemlerinden faydalanarak değerlendirmeye hedeflemektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Çin Halk Cumhuriyeti, Doğu Çin Denizi, Güney Çin Denizi, Hint Okyanusu, Deniz Stratejisi

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## Introduction

Due to the nature of the Asian-Pacific region being in a very intertwined state, regarding the control of maritime jurisdiction zones and trade routes, there is great competition between both the littoral states themselves and the global actors that are trying to secure their interests in the area. The western states' hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region, which began with the age of discovery, mostly went into the control of the United States of America (USA) after the Second World War. In the early 2000s, with the People's Republic of China (PRC)'s departure from being a regional power both in the economic and military sense and evolving into a global actor, it began to fill in the power vacuums in the region and employ more effective and expansive strategies in its nearby seas which are the East China Sea, South China Sea and Indian Ocean. However, not wanting to lose its dominance in the region, the United States, with its allies, has employed a strategy of containing the PRC by creating new organisations and alliances.

The naval strategy that China uses in the East China Sea, South China Sea and Indian Ocean shows many similarities to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR)'s activities during the Cold War in their surrounding seas. PRC's activities, trainings, tactics, systems, and equipment have been shaped with inspiration from the Soviet Navy, and its effects are still being felt (Martin N. Murphy, Toshi Yoshihara, 2015, 13-39). Therefore, the naval strategy employed by the PRC since its inception has been viewed as the legacy of the USSR. China has consistently been growing every year with its reforms implemented. In the final quarter of 2023, China's economic growth was revealed to be 5.2 percent, this has pushed China to be the world's biggest exporter and its second-largest economy (Tolga Demiryol, January 26, 2024). When considering the relation between PRC's economic growth during the last 20 years, it's defense spending, it can be seen that it's perplexing goals in the defense sector has now become easier for China. As a regarding policies that PRC's will follow on the course of becoming a global power; PRC has begun expanding its claims in the surrounding seas (the East China Sea and South China Sea). In addition, China, in hopes of both preventing the USA's containment policy and securing regional interests, has defined a parallel strategy in the Indian Ocean with the Belt and Road Initiative. With this strategy, China tries to further its presence in its surrounding seas in a more expansive way and tries to conduct the defense of the Chinese Mainland beginning from the Indian Ocean. PRC strategy that is employed in the surrounding seas as it mentioned; in the East China Sea, Anti Access and Area Denial (A2AD)" is implemented, in the South China Sea is the creation of artificial islands in order to cement its regional ownership and improve its military retaliation capabilities and the PRC invests in the ports of states which it maintains close relations in the Indian Ocean. It aims to use these maritime areas as both an economic and military asset to support its navy and to improve its military capabilities.

With the PRC's emergence as an economic power, repeated crises have occurred between the USA and the PRC; effects the PRC's relations with global and regional powers, especially regarding trade, geopolitics, and international law. In order to shine a light on the subject, primarily, the PRC's "Three-Region Maritime Strategy" will be taken into consideration, and the main factors for the creation of this strategy will be examined, subsequently, within the framework of this strategy employed by the PRC;

The activities performed in the East China Sea, South China Sea and Indian Ocean and the practices in these seas will be examined. Second, the USA's activities, similar to their strategy to contain Soviet naval power, aimed at preventing the expansion of the PRC in the East China Sea, South China Sea, Indian Ocean and its actions within the framework of approaching the problem of pressuring PRC will be discussed.

### **China's Three-Region Maritime Strategy**

The PRC dominates the nearby seas, including the East China Sea, South China Sea and Indian Ocean, consolidating its position of power and devising a strategy. With its three-region maritime strategy, the PRC is working to cement its presence in its surrounding seas and to bolster its presence in adjacent waters. With this strategy, the PRC defies the United States, which has interests in the region, and expand its area of control. The effort spent by the PRC in this strategy can be compared to the struggle between the USSR and the USA during the cold war. Trying to gain supremacy in a bipolar world state, the USSR understood the importance of controlling and effectively using the seas, and with this in mind, improving its navy, it began deploying it to the maritime areas of strategic importance within its regions of interest and influence at the time (Sergey G. Gorshkov, *The Sea Power of the State*, 1990, p.64). The USSR, in order to strengthen its strategic position and its related defense gave importance to its navy and started developing a blue-water navy capable of waving its flag in the world's regions of interest and influence.

The strategies that were used by the USSR during the cold war to maintain control of the seas are being used today by the PRC, in accordance with Mahan's naval power theories to protect its national interests, to maintain control of the open seas far out from the Chinese mainland, and to improve its naval units' operation capabilities in surrounding seas. With this purpose, the PRC has begun improving its navy, which is their most important asset in the context of the naval strategy that they have implemented. Since the beginning of the 1990's PRC Navy (People's Liberation Army Navy) has made serious progress and has converted its modernisation plan into an expansion plan (Kozan Erkan, July 30th 2019). Similar to the USSR's naval strategy during the cold war, the PRC has also begun to evolve its naval forces from a coastal to a blue-water fleet. The PRC, wanting to increase its naval presence in regions far out from its mainland has deemed it necessary to improve its aircraft carrier fleet and, in this framework, purchased the sister platform of the Kuznetsov, the Varyag, which was stuck with its sleds due to her construction not being completed yet (Cenk Ozgen, November 2018, p.32), and after her modernisation works, entered her into service in 2012 as the CNS Liaoning. The most important factor that made this adaptation necessary is the USA's and the US Navy's increasing activities in the East China Sea and the South China Sea surrounding the PRC (Liu Huaqing, *Memoirs of Liu Huaqing*, 2004, p.439). One of the USA's most important actions in the region was the renaming of the USA Pacific Command (PACOM) to the USA Indian-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM). This change made in May 2018 signifies the importance of the connection between the Indian and Pacific Oceans in relation to National Defense Strategy (Koyuncu, 2021, p.18). Additionally, this is seen as a move that will increase the US Navy's presence in the region. The PRC who thoroughly analysed the strategy used by the USA towards the USSR Navy during

the Cold War, has had a better response to a similar strategy being used against them by the USA. Additionally, the PRC has the capability of seizing the initiative in a possible combat engagement with the USA and its allies.

The PRC's and the USSR's similarities in maritime policies and related strategies are also interesting. First, like the USSR, the PRC is also a growing continental power that draws strength from land-based resources.

Second, both actors developed their navies in the framework of Mahan's "Maritime Control Theory", being aware of the importance of sea power. Third, both countries have created defense strategies against the United States and allies. (Kohji Kuhura, 2022, p.16). Additionally, since its establishment in 1949 until 1960 when China-USSR relations deteriorated, the Chinese Navy has received support and been influenced by the Soviet Navy in the context of sea power and maritime strategy (Kohji Kuhura, 2022, p.17). Just as it was important for Russia, who today is the descendant of the Soviet Navy and the USSR, to show their presence and dominance in the Baltic Sea and the Arctic region to maintain Russian interests and achieve their goals in the Cold War era, it was equally important in a geostrategic sense for the Chinese Navy to operate in the East China Sea, South China Sea, and Indian Ocean.

### **The East China Sea**

The region commonly referred to as the China Sea in this paper includes the East and South China Seas. Presently, there have been disagreements between littoral states about sovereignty and maritime jurisdiction in these waters. While the sovereignty issues between the PRC and Japan continue in the East China Sea and the South China Sea, the situation is more complex. Strategically, The PRC starts its defensive lines towards possible threats to their mainland in the East China sea. This strategy is similar to the USSR's design of East Europe as a buffer zone and a forward operating area to create a defensive line against possible attacks from the West (Claire Wallace, Elena Sidorenko and Oxana Chmouliar, 1997, p.3). The Taiwan Island in the East China Sea also holds a high level of strategic importance in the region. Taiwan plays an important role for the USA in Asia-Pacific geopolitics to limit the PRC's operational capability and to implement the containment policy towards the PRC (Ayşe Kurban, September 9, 2022). While China views the Taiwan issue as an internal affair, the United States uses Taiwan as a vehicle for a strategy of keeping the PRC under control and containing it. The 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait crisis and the 2001 Hainan islands issue have been important factors for the PRC's development of its strategy. In particular, the USA's deployment of its navy in the region on the side of Taiwan and its pressuring of China during the 1995 Taiwan crisis have been great lessons for China to learn the importance of having a strong navy. Additionally, since then, China has started its defensive lines on the East coast line of the Chinese Mainland through the manmade islands in the South China Sea far out from its mainland, against the USA and its allies' activities in the region and possible attacks. Today, the approach displayed by the PRC towards the USA in the Asia-Pacific region was implemented on the line from the Black Sea to the North Pole by the USSR during the Cold war, and subsequently been implemented by Russia in Syria in a highly persuasive way. (Evren Mercan, 2022, p.561).

It can be surmised that China and the USSR have differing perceptions of threats. This is because while China expects threats from the sea, the USSR expects threats from land-based areas. However, striking similarities can be observed when comparing the defense strategies of the two countries (Kohji Kuhara, 2022, 18). China has implemented what can be defined as a forward defensive line or buffer zone in the East China Sea, similar to what the USSR created between it and the Western Bloc. China effectively applies what can be defined as an A2AD capability, the Active Strategic Counterattacks on Exterior Lines (ASCEL) concept in the East China Sea. China has improved this capability through the hypersonic missiles it produces and through its naval units, whose numbers are increasing by the day. The primary strategy defined in the ASCEL concept of China was to handicap the USA's potential military interventions and future military presence in the island chains, bringing together Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines and the Japanese islands, including the disputed maritime zones in the region (Evren Mercan, 2022, 561). The first phase in China's ASCEL concept is the prevention of threats about 1000 nautical miles from the Chinese Mainland in the Pacific Ocean through the use of the JL and Dong Feng series medium- and long-range hypersonic speed ballistic/nuclear guided missiles, the Yingji series ballistic missiles for ground and naval targets, and the HQ series guided missiles for air targets.

The second phase involves containing the threat via naval units and aircraft and their exclusion from the operating area.

The Chinese Mainland, being surrounded by Japan's islands in the East China Sea, affects China's Naval and commercial ships exiting the area. At the same time, China is experiencing problems with other neighbouring states about islands and maritime jurisdiction. The disputed islands in the East China Sea and their surrounding rocks and reefs located on important sea routes or waypoints play a preventative role in the exit of the Chinese Navy into the Pacific Ocean. Thus, to maintain its ASCEL activities, China's naval units should use the critical waypoints between these islands. In the event of tension or conflict, the deployment of guided munitions, missiles, and submarines to and around critical islands and the creation of minefields, Chinese naval units' maneuverability will be inhibited when traversing critical routes.

To prevent airborne threats just as they would like to prevent seaborne threats in the East China Sea, China carries out its air defense from the Japanese Islands to the open seas, using the S-300 and S-400 Air Defense Systems that it has procured from Russia and the HQ series air defense systems that it has developed itself (Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance, August 24, 2018).

Furthermore, since 2008, Chinese naval units have carried out operations in narrow waters like Okinawa-Miyako Islands line, the Osumi Strait, Tsugaru, and the Soya Strait, in the southern regions of Japan (Japan Ministry of Defense, August 2023). These activities by China in the East China Sea are meant to grant China the control of the seas and air superiority, making it easier for Chinese naval units to access open waters in the event of tension or armed conflicts. In summary, China sees the East China Sea as a defensive line and, in the framework of the ASCEL concept, practises creating a defensive line in the region to increase its manoeuvrability in critical sea routes and to determine what course its navy will follow to exit into open waters during tensions that can occur in the region.

It is a more difficult process to create and maintain a defensive line at sea than on land. Due to the sea not having a stable nature, the operating area is constantly changing due to seasonal and weather conditions, and defensive lines need to be larger. Therefore, to maintain control over this vast area, China must increase the number of its naval units and deploy many weapon systems developed to implement its ASCEL concept at strategic points in the ECS.

### **The South China Sea**

The South China Sea, unlike the East China Sea, is surrounded by many more littoral states. China, Malesia, Vietnam, Taiwan, Brunei and the Philippines which have the most dynamic economies in the world, share a coast with this sea. The PRC and Japan which have the largest economies in the region fulfil their energy and raw material needs (about 80%) through sea transport in this maritime zone. When taking a look at the industries, manufacturing in the region and the related raw materials needs, it can be seen that 27.6% of the world's sea commerce takes place in the South China Sea (UNCTAD, Review of Maritime Transport, 2023). There are also problems with the determination of maritime jurisdictions and the ownership of islands in the region between China and other littoral states. Rich hydrocarbon reservoirs and fishing activities in the region are the most important factors of the emergence of areas of contention. With the beginning of the declaration of independence of the Philippines in 1970, Vietnam in 1956 and Malesia in 1979 in the Spratly and Paracel islands region, has begun coming into light as a regional crisis zone. (Cengiz Topel Mermer, South China Sea the Rough Curve of China Who Defied the USA Hegemony, 2022, 9). China backs its claims of ownership of a large portion of the South China Sea and the islands on historical grounds. China claims that it has controlled the South China Sea since the Xia Dynasty, which ruled China from 2183 to 1752 BCE. In 1979, The Nationalist Party of China (Kuomintang), has "designated a region as being under the sovereignty of China and drawn on maps of the South China Sea eleven-dash lines also containing the Spratly Islands". On official documents of the PRC after its conception in 1949, this map showing China's claims in the Sea is actually from an eleven-dash line map published by the Chinese Republic in 1935 (Peter Dutton, "Three Disputes and Three Objectives: China and the South China Sea", Autumn 2011, 3). China has reached a verbal agreement with Vietnam regarding the Gulf of Tonkin maritime borders. As a jest to the Vietnamese regime, China constricted its area and removed two-dash lines from the map. Thus, a map known as "the nine-dash line" map. The nine-dash line map still has its validity.



**Figure 1.** China's Eleven and Nine-Dash Lines, in the South China Sea  
 Source: <https://thediplomat.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/thediplomat-blv1.jpg>

In accordance with international law, China has also made its claims eligible in its domestic legislation. After, China signed the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), its claims and tactics in the South China Sea; have become clearer in the diplomatic, political and military sense. Since 2013, China has started improving the islands; the rocks and reefs that could not be inhabited have been filled, raised and pushed on top of the sea level. At the same time, they have been enlarged and made into artificial islands, and it has begun using them for economic and military purposes. In this context, it has been confirmed that there were artificial islands built by China on the Cuarteron, Fiery Cross, Gaven, Hughes, Johnson, Mischief and Subi reefs (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 2016).



**Figure 2.** The Conversion of the Cuarteron Reef by China into an Artificial Island  
 Cuarteron Reef (21.02.2014)                                      Cuarteron Reef (26.05.2022)

Source: <https://amti.csis.org/cuarteron-reef/>

To maintain control in the broad maritime zone, China operates its defense system in the East China Sea in a way that it can support its activities in the South China Sea. China uses the artificial islands it has built in the South China Sea to house its naval units, create a forward operating base and detect, identify and intercept ships and submarines belonging to other actors in the region. Due to this, China has built ports, helicopter pads and airstrips and placed satellite communications equipment, naval/air reconnaissance radars, and weapons for naval and air targets. China's actions here show similarities with the USSR, creating a zone for its ballistic missile submarines (Nuclear Armed Missiles Submarine-SSBN) with nuclear missile capability against the USA in the Okhotsk Sea during the Cold War (Kohji Kuhara, 2022, 21).

China, which shares a coast with the South China Sea and the East China Sea, maintains its maritime control most easily in the South China Sea. In times of tension and warfare, during an operation carried out by China; naval units; ships and submarines need bases where they can receive water columns to a sufficient depth that the operation is carried out in and logistics support from bases. Also, during an operation, the storage that a submarine uses far away from the enemy's intelligence and reconnaissance range helps keep the submarine in stealth is its most important feature. The South China Sea is the most suitable maritime zone for this because of the proximity of Japan and South Korea and the East China Sea, which is not deep enough to support submarine operations (Hiroshi Ichikawa and Robert C. Beardsley, “*The Current System in the Yellow and East China Seas*”, 2022, 77). Due to this, for their ships and submarines, China creates submarine storage facilities and forward deployment areas to be able to cause a surprise effect and for stealth during potential tensions that can arise. China, wanting to have effective maritime control in the area, builds submarine bases for its navy and especially the nuclear submarines (SSBN) and them to support its ASCE concept through its artificial islands and the bases it has built on them.

In summary, China is building artificial islands in the South China Sea to maintain maritime control and is using these islands for military and commercial purposes (Matthew P. Funairole, Joseph S. Bermudez Jr. and Brian Hart, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 04 August, 2021). China gives weight to its submarine operations



to be able to apply its ASCEL concept in the region and plans to improve, especially its defenses against the US Navy's Anti-Submarine Warfare. China sees the South China Sea as a core national interest and establishes a defensive line for the Chinese Mainland beginning from the South China Sea.

### **The Indian Ocean**

Units of the PRC's Navy aim to use the Indian Ocean as a base/shelter or a support area against the USA's containment policy against the PRC. The Indian Ocean presents the first line of defense against the prevention of hostile forces' combat and logistics support in the strategy that China applies. A similar situation to the US Navy posing a threat to the southern front of the USSR and the Soviet Navy through its 6th Fleet during the Cold War, the 5th Fleet of the US Navy in the Arabian Sea posed a threat to the Indian Ocean and ultimately the PRC through the South China Sea. Due to this, the PRC tries to prevent actors it views as a threat, at the farthest range from its mainland, and to bolster its presence and improve its deterrence capabilities to counter the US' containment policy.

China, within the framework of its ASCEL concept, is attempting to prevent potential threats from the Indian Ocean and to secure maritime trade routes coming from the Indian Ocean, however due to the scale of the area, this approach is not as easy as it seems. Given this fact, the PRC requires a large fleet, including aircraft carriers to operate in the Indian Ocean. In this context, China is making an effort to develop naval units, such as aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines, frigates etc. and forge agreements with states that share a coast with the Indian ocean and protect its military and commercial presence in the region. Although their methods might differ, the PRC's approach to the Indian Ocean is similar to the Soviet Union's strategic approach to the Mediterranean. However, there are some points for which this approach differs. The PRC aims to maintain influence and access in the Indian Ocean through trade, with its tremendous economic might and other economic activities rather than martial prowess (James E. Fanell, "China's Global Naval Strategy and Expanding Force Structure: Pathway to Hegemony", 2019, 9). China, with this strategy that it uses, is not only limited by the regions in question but effectively uses a mutual economic development project "Maritime Silk Road" that it bases on the win-win principle, within its "Belt and Road initiative" according to their interests in specific areas of the world.

The PRC gains political influence and create local infrastructure, primarily through its support to countries with which it has financing and development projects. Later, with this advantage, it aims to secure especially the ports it has built/modernised and managed for the host country to gain military and logistical access for itself (James E. Fanell, "China's Global Naval Strategy and Expanding Force Structure: Pathway to Hegemony", 2019, 19). The PRC intends to gradually expand the ports that it has taken over the management of in overseas countries, starting from the Indian Ocean and have them be always useable by their Navy. The PRC is signing cooperation deals in underdeveloped and developing countries through the "Belt and Road Project" and granting large loans to support projects that help economic development. This creates political and economic problems for countries with weak economies, although the PRC convinces these states with a win-win relationship it is argued that it heavily burdens these states and causes

them to be dependent to the PRC. (Serdar Yılmaz, “The Financial Capacity of the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ and the Debt Diplomacy Used by China”, 2020, 633). Additionally, China procures a large portion of its energy from hydrocarbon reserves in the Middle East and transports these resources to its mainland through the Indian Ocean and the Malacca Strait via the Indian Ocean-Far East maritime trade route. Due to the need for hydrocarbon resources mainly gathered from the Middle East and transported through the Indian Ocean-Far East maritime trade route, the PRC is also planning alternate routes in case of unfortunate events or tensions or conflicts that can occur in the region.



**Figure 3.** Belt and Road Initiative of the PRC and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

**Source:** <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/behind-chinas-gambit-pakistan>

To reduce its dependency on the Malacca Strait, the PRC has begun to search for alternate trade routes. One of these alternate trade routes connects the PRC’s exclusive economic zone of Kashgar to Pakistan’s Gwadar Port. On the route that makes up an important section of the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ that links China to the Middle East and Africa, the PRC aims to transport the goods it produces in its interior regions to Gwadar Port, and then export them to the world by sea. The Gwadar Port on this route with a promising future has room to dock 2 to 3 ships with 50 DWT and it is planned for it to have 150 ships and 400 million tonnes of cargo by 2045 (Yeşim Demir, China’s Silk Road Project: Gwadar Port, 2022, 105). China, which carries out most of its petroleum and gas imports via sea, intends to use Gwadar Port as an energy allocation site. In this context, with Gwadar Port being the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor’s (CPEC) exit point to the Indian Ocean, it is a geostrategic point of importance for China to fulfil its petroleum and gas needs without being dependent on the Malacca Strait. Due to this, the PRC gives importance to the development of this port by investing in it and storing the incoming petroleum and transporting it to the Chinese Mainland through a pipeline (Gökтуğ Çalışkan, The Gwadar Port’s Strategic importance: China’s New Military Base, 2022). Aside from being used by

China for strategic purposes, the Gwadar Port presents economic advantages for Pakistan as well. The Gwadar Port, which presents a country-wide and region-wide economic development, is important for Pakistan for both improving its relationship with the PRC and showing the PRC as a force with it against its nemesis India. The PRC intends to use Gwadar Port which is the final point in its “Pearl Line Strategy” in the West, to observe and manage the US’s activities and maritime operations in the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean and as a base to provide logistical and munition support in peacetime and as a forward operating base in wartime. It is estimated that the number of dual-purpose bases with both commercial and military use by China will increase in the future. To provide security to these ports, make access easy, maintain effective maritime control and to provide force protection and logistics capabilities, the PRC entered its first aircraft carrier, Liaoning (CV 16), into service in April 2018 and conducted its first task group operation in the Philippines Sea just East of Taiwan (Franz-Stefan Gady, ‘Chinas 1st Carrier Strike Group Reaches Initial Operational capability’, 05 June 2018). The PRC has entered its second aircraft carrier Shandong (CV 17) into its navy’s inventory. Lastly, it is planned for the first of the PRC Navy’s new generation nuclear-powered aircraft carriers, Fujian (CV 18), to join the PRC Navy within 2025 as its third aircraft carrier (Eurasiantimes, Six Aircraft Carriers by 2035 – China’s Ambitious Plan for PLAN As It Looks to Counter US, Cut Indian Influence, 10 March 2024). It is predicted that the Chinese Navy will possess 80 destroyers, 140 frigates and corvettes, 10 SSBNs, 16 SSNs, 46 diesel submarines, 6 aircraft carriers by 2040 (Congressional Research Service, China Naval Modernisation: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities, 30 January 2024 (11)). The PRC, with a large navy, will have the capability to prevent threats from the Indian Ocean, implement its ASCEL doctrine in adjacent seas and conduct any activity to maintain maritime control in the region.

### **The US struggle to keep their presence in the region against the PRC’s strategies in the East China Sea, South China Sea and Indian Ocean**

The PRC’s growth as both an economic and a military power greatly disturbs the United States which is in a global power position and it counters the PRC with economic and military reactions. The point of these reactions by the US is to prevent the expansion of the PRC in the East and South China Seas and the Indian Ocean and to maintain the US’ superiority in the region. The Soviet maritime strategy during the Cold War has structural similarities with the maritime strategy the PRC uses today; that involves the East China Sea, South China Sea and Indian Ocean. Furthermore, the US who conducted activities in the framework of controlling Soviet naval power and its strategy to contain the Soviets, conducts a similar strategy today to curb the PRC’s expansion and to deter the PRC from its goal. Since 2005, the US has been closely monitoring the PRC’s development and activities. The US Navy which does not want to lose its control over the Pacific, has greatly increased the chances of a clash or conflict with PRC navy units. The US’s support and alliance with countries such as Taiwan, the Philippines, South Korea etc. being related to their issues with the PRC has also increased the chances of an armed conflict in the region. Despite all these negativities, the USA and the PRC have been in efforts to put in place mechanisms in many areas relating to Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea-CUES and other measures to provide trust and have been coming together to prevent

potential conflicts and any negative events that can arise (Sam Lagrone, Document: Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea, 17 June, 2014 3:16 PM - updated: 22 August 2016 12:00 PM.). The US, showing a similar approach to the USSR during the Cold War, used gunboat diplomacy to increase its presence to prevent the PRC's expanse in the East China Sea, South China Sea, and Indian Ocean. The US expects its strong allies (Japan, South Korea and Australia) to share the burden and forge economic and security deals with these countries. Due to the PRC's economic and military development and activities in the Pacific, the US has designated the PRC as the primary long-term strategic threat and has shifted its priorities in planning and capabilities to counter the PRC. (CNO NAVPLAN, 202, 2).

Due to the PRC Navy gaining strength day by day, expanding its activities in the East China Sea, South China Sea, and Indian Ocean, building artificial islands and weaponizing them, and being seen as the closest rival to the USA in terms of economy, the USA views the PRC as the highest-value strategic threat. Therefore, the US has designated a strong and decisive counter-reaction strategy against the PRC's interference in and activities in the seas. In response to the PRC's maritime jurisdiction claims by the PRC in the East China Sea, South China Sea and Indian Ocean and the military activities that it conducts in these maritime areas, the US Navy, conducts joint drills and activities with Indian, Japanese and Australian Navies named Trident, Malabar, Trilateral (US Navy Official Web Site, 11 November 2022, US Forces Japan, 21 November 2002, Dzirhan Mahadzır, Japan, Australia Drill Together in South China Sea for Trident Exercise, 27 June 2023). Additionally, the US makes defense and security deals with allies and creates alliances like AUKUS and intends to control the policies and presence of China in the region. The US primarily presents its response in the framework of international law and argues that most of China's activities and claims in the South China Sea do not have any basis in international law.

The US shares the PRC's activities and claims in the East China Sea, South China Sea and Indian Ocean with the international public and holds a firm political stance alongside its allies against the PRC in the region. Also, to stop its military and political loss of power in the region, the US shows teeth and presence with its navy and to maintain its presence in the region, signs defense and security deals with its allies in the region and conducts joint drills. The PRC, which is growing in both economic and military terms, fills in the US gap by implementing strategic approaches and policies. The PRC develops its navy not only just to conduct its maritime control during a crisis with the US but also to show the international public that the US Navy is weaker than the PRC Navy, especially in the PRC's adjacent maritime areas. The PRC's military and economic growth are similar, making it difficult for the US to balance the situation on its own. Force disparity lies at the heart of the US strategy and it requires the support of its allies in the region for the long-distance superiority of force. The United States plans to share this burden with its allies and other countries with common interests in the region. Due to this, the US has been trying to bring the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which operates outside the region, into the negotiations. Thus, during the 32 nd NATO visit in 28-30 July, for the first time, Australian, Japanese, New Zealander and South Korean leaders were invited. In the report released after the Brussels visit in 2021 and later in NATO's

2022 “NATO New Strategy Document” accepted in the 2022 Madrid Summit, China was classified as a threat for the first time. In the 13 th article of the document in question, it is stated that; “The policies that China implements are counter to NATO’s interests, security and values, and that China uses political, economic and military vehicles to increase its global weight however it is emphasized that the uncertainty relating to China’s strategy, intentions, and military strength still stands. They have made evaluations that the PRC has conducted activities against the international establishment in seamanship, space, and cyberspace, that there is a deepening cooperation between China and Russia and that this is against NATO’s values and that the PRC uses its economic power to create dependencies and increase its hegemony in this context. (NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, 2022, p.5). However, in 2021 the EU-China trade volume surpassing the USA-China trade volume and China becoming the EU’s largest trade partner (Gökhan Tekir, NATO-Çin Halk Cumhuriyeti Rekabeti, 2023, p.334) shows that the EU countries that make up NATO are in a close economic relationship with the PRC. This situation also caused tensions in alliances with the PRC. The US, raising geopolitical competition with the PRC to the highest level, has placed the PRC at the top of the list in its National Security Strategy Report and has concentrated on how to effectively compete with the PRC (US National Security Strategy, 2022, p.23).

The US conduct economic and military deals with allied countries in the Indian-Pacific region to reduce the load. In this context, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan have critical responsibilities to effectively respond to the defense line in the East China sea from the strategy used by the PRC in the surrounding seas. The US, in order to strengthen its position in the South China sea to counter the PRC’s submarines, increases it’s “Anti-Submarine” capabilities, supports allied countries and littoral states in this context and helps them in increasing their capabilities. Therefore, the US, being aware of the geographic and strategic importance of the artificial islands built by the PRC, intends to create alliances with other regional countries and exploit their geographic advantages. The US, just like how it has supported Japan during the Cold War, has made a great effort to support the littoral states in this region, especially in terms of their maritime operating capabilities.

The PRC continues to increase its regional influence in the Indian Ocean via the silk road aspect of the “Belt and Road initiative” started in 2013. If India uses its regional sea power and stance by siding with the United States in the future, in a possible engagement with the PRC, the PRC will need to expand the deployment of its navy units in this context. This deployment will require a large amount of operational activity from the PRC Navy. The US, becoming closer with India, aims to reduce the PRC’s current advantages and force more costs on them to implement an attrition strategy. By uniting with the countries it has close ties and cooperation with and creating a coalition to limit the PRC in the East China Sea, South China Sea and Indian Ocean.

### **Conclusion**

Although it does not display a very stern stance in its mutually dependent relationship with the PRC, the United States clearly shows that it is in a heavy strategic competition with China in its economic and military activities and the policies it implements. After

World War 2, in the bipolar world order, the US won its battle against the USSR and has been left as the sole world power. However, at the beginning of the 2000s, the US, in order to counter the PRC and keep the PRC as the sole dominant power, began pressuring the PRC using a by using a approach similar to the containment strategy it had used against the USSR during the Cold War. However, the PRC has shown up against the US as a much more resilient rival than the USSR in many respects and by designing unique strategies. Because the PRC has used its strategy in the East China Sea, South China Sea and Indian Ocean effectively, it cannot be said that the United States' policies and strategies against the PRC have been successful. In the framework of the strategy implemented by the PRC in the seas in question, the ASCEL Concept in the South China Sea has created an effective defense line to prevent threats from the East. In particular, the speed and range of supersonic munitions produced by China have made it difficult for naval units to enter the region, especially the US aircraft carriers.

The artificial islands created by the PRC in the South China Sea and the military bases and submarine storage facilities built on them have given the PRC Navy control over a large area of this geography and freedom of operations. In the framework of the "Belt and Road Initiative" it has implemented in 2013 both the economic and supportive use of the ports for its naval units, it is evaluated that the PRC has designated this region as a support area to maintain forward maritime control. Since the PRC has deemed the Indian Ocean as the centre of mass to hinder the enemy's warfighting and logistics support during a potential threat situation, it has been working to increase its presence and deterrence in the Indian Ocean. Due to this, alongside the Gwadar Port that it runs, it is foreseen for it to conduct similar applications in other ports in the region. It seems difficult for the United States to counter the strategic moves made by the PRC on its own in the three fronts of the East China Sea, South China Sea and Indian Ocean. Because of this, the US is attempting to form strong alliances and even use NATO in the region to prevent the PRC. Rising global competition escalated by the day, and a new Cold War, in which the United States was at a disadvantage, occurred. If the US is unable to fill the power vacuums in the region effectively and continues without changing its policies in its fight against the PRC, it will be clear that a new monopolar world order in which the PRC is dominant will occur in the near future.

#### **NOTES:**

1. A2AD: This concept is defined as the capability of preventing the use of a specific region at sea by hostile units. It is the act of engaging hostiles through long range guided munitions and missiles deployed on land by Navy and Air Force assets.

2. The AUKUS alliance was formed by the US, Australia and the United Kingdom in the 16<sup>th</sup> of April 2021. The pact that has been titled as the most important foreign policy move has the aim of a deep integration of "science, technology, industrial bases and supply lines" in the context of "improvement of mutual capabilities and the sharing of technology" in the fields of "security and defense" that will be developed between the three countries. However, the first goal of the pact has been considered deemed to be to procure a nuclear submarine for Australia "as soon as possible". *Siyaset Ekonomi*

ve Toplum Araştırmaları Vakfı Web Page, <https://www.setav.org/aukus-pakti-cine-karsi-yeni-cephe/>

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