

Dire Straits: Naval Security Competition between China and the United States in the Strait of Malacca

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The Strait of Malacca is a point of convergence for the dynamic environment of piracy, terrorism, energy security, and naval cooperation in maritime Asia. In order to understand the various forces shaping the security situation in the Strait, this paper analyzes the roles that China and the United States play in the region. It advances an argument that Chinese expansion will lead to a comparative rise in China's position, but that ultimately the Strait will remain a theater for international balancing. A careful analysis of Chinese naval doctrine, as well as examination of secondary sources that explore regional military engagement and economic factors, present the Strait of Malacca as a passageway of wary stasis between the two superpowers.

China's "blue-water" naval ambitions within the context of its growing global presence have been the focus of strategists on both sides of the Pacific for at least the past two decades.¹ There is a wide variety of opinions on what this much-touted development means on the ground, ranging from those who believe that it is a futile effort which cannot hope to match the modern naval capacities of the United States, to those who assert China already has startling capabilities which could pose a material threat to even an advanced navy.² These strategic analyses lie within the greater scope of security in the Asian naval theater, a multifaceted issue, which touches on energy security, transnational threats such as piracy and terrorism, and international cooperation in naval affairs. Given its geopolitically vital location, the Strait of Malacca is an area of unique convergence for these diverse forces.

This study is situated amidst a complex web of military capabilities, national

¹ See You Ji and You Xu, "In Search of Blue Water Power: The PLA Navy's Maritime Strategy in the 1990s," *The Pacific Review* 4, no. 2 (1991): 137-149; Zhan Jun, "China Goes to the Blue Waters: The Navy, Seapower Mentality and the South China Sea," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 17 no.3 (1994): 180-208.

² Robert S. Ross, "Assessing the China Threat," *National Interest* 81 (2005): 81; Howard J. Dooley, "The Great Leap Outward: China's Maritime Renaissance," *Journal of East Asian Affairs* 26, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2012): 66-67.

interests, and security threats with the goal of understanding where China and the United States currently lie. By tracking the developments of these nations, particularly China's emerging military, official policy, and situational concerns, this paper will examine the following two questions: (1) what are the roles of China and the United States in the Strait of Malacca and (2) where will this relationship go in the future? Ultimately, this study argues that although the transnational issues of piracy and terrorism remain a concern for day-to-day operations in the Strait, China and the United States will implement their involvement around a grander strategic framework of regional stability and trade security. In practice, this means that China's maturing naval doctrine will call for ways to expand the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) into a standing peacetime force by framing the security of trade routes through the Strait as a national interest, while the United States will have to find ways to maintain its strong foothold in the region against a comparatively rising China through greater direct naval presence and diplomatic cooperation.

Pirates or Pragmatism? Why the Strait Matters

The Strait of Malacca is among the most vital trade channels in the world. Situated at the nexus of the Indo-Pacific region, the Strait is the longest major navigational strait in the world. It is safer to navigate than the neighboring Sunda Strait, while offering a route that is 1,600 nautical miles shorter than the alternative Lombok-Makassar Straits route.³ The Strait of Malacca sees traffic in excess of 60,000 ships a year, carrying cargo ranging from crude oil to finished industrial products between East Asia, the West, and the Middle East. In comparison, the Suez Canal sees less than half of this level of traffic, and the Panama Canal sees about a third.⁴ While Thailand has considered building a canal across the Kra Isthmus for the purpose of reducing traffic along this route, no efforts for such a project are currently underway, leaving the Strait of Malacca as one of the safest, most efficient, and consequently most highly-utilized highways for major naval traffic in the region.⁵

³ Mokhzani Zubir, *The Strategic Value of the Strait of Malacca* (Kuala Lumpur: Maritime Institute of Malaysia, 2004), 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵ Felipe Umaña, *Threat Convergence: Transnational Security Threats in the Straits of Malacca* (Washington: The Fund for Peace, 2012), 6.

For these reasons, the security of the Strait extends beyond the littoral states of Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore, attracting the attention of major global powers.

Piracy and terrorism in the Strait are two distinct, yet related, threats that have earned the attention of both China and the United States. These transnational threats are detrimental to all nations affected, and therefore cooperation on such issues is both advisable and conceivable given the convergence of interests. Overall, efforts to combat piracy, both unilaterally and through multilateral organizations, have been successful. From February 2007 to October 2014, there were only about thirteen incidences of attempted or successful piracy or armed robbery per year. Only five of those incidences were classified as Category 1 (Very Significant) by the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia, an international piracy monitoring organization which collects information throughout the Indo-Pacific.⁶ Moreover, the incidences decreased in severity over the course of this time period, with both fewer successful attacks and less significant attacks.⁷ Property theft is reason enough to warrant preventative measures given the sheer volume of goods passing through the Strait, but the threat of terrorist hijackings makes such attacks even more worrisome. The United States in the post-9/11 era, along with its regional allies, has taken a strong interest in ensuring that commercial transportation cannot be used for terrorism, and it views Malacca as a prime target for commandeering a ship to assist in a global terrorist attack.⁸

China, in particular, has vested interest in ensuring the safe passage of cargo through the Strait of Malacca. China's expansion as an exporting power has necessitated the transport of Chinese goods around the world in the most efficient manner possible. Malacca has thus become the gateway to reaching major markets such as India or Europe. Furthermore, China is heavily dependent on oil flowing through the Strait. Since 2003, China has been a net importer of energy, and 75 percent of China's oil imports pass through this single geographical chokepoint.⁹

⁶ Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships in Asia, "Consolidated Incident Reports," ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre (February 2007-October 2014). <https://portal.recaap.org/OpenMap>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Umaña, *Threat Convergence*, 8, 14, 18.

⁹ M. Taylor Fravel and Alexander Liebman, "Beyond the Moat: The PLAN's Evolving Interests and Potential Influence," *The Chinese Navy: Expanding Capabilities, Evolving Roles* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2011), 63.

Despite efforts to diversify its sources of energy, a disruption of this supply would have disastrous repercussions for China. In this sense, China's interest in Malacca echoes its dedication to maritime claims in the South China Sea, which some analysts argue is driven by both the natural resources found in the area and the need to secure sea lines of communication (SLOCs) for ships transporting vital goods to and from China.¹⁰ Chinese interest in the Strait of Malacca as a critical passageway for commerce appropriately contributes to this narrative of achieving energy security in the Indo-Pacific.

Similarly, the United States sees the Strait of Malacca as a critical juncture of international trade. Presently, the United States provides valuable support to security efforts in the Strait, ranging from the donation to Malaysia of advanced radar systems that monitor the Strait, to the coordination of joint naval exercises with Malaysia and Singapore.¹¹ This cooperation in intelligence, technology, and operations signifies more than just assistance for the benefit of these littoral nations. The United States works to keep Malacca safe in order to protect ships that are headed for U.S. shores and to keep an open sea lane between its fleet stationed in Japan and the Persian Gulf.¹² The United States, like China, is willing to make a significant investment in protecting the Strait of Malacca, and does so for its own specific reasons.

Straight from the Dragon's Mouth

An analysis of Chinese naval doctrine reveals that the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN)'s view of itself is undergoing a period of metamorphosis.¹³ This new sense of self can be understood as a shift from a standing military force awaiting a crisis to an active defensive presence protecting China in the worldwide economy. On the whole, the PLAN is increasingly dissatisfied to see its purview and, consequently, its share of the budget, limited to matters of conventional military defense. As analysts Taylor Fravel and Alexander Liebman put it, "Overall, the

¹⁰ M. Taylor Fravel, "China's Strategy in the South China Sea," *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs* 33, no. 3 (2011): 296.

¹¹ Caroline Vavro, "Piracy, Terrorism and the Balance of Power in the Malacca Strait," *Canadian Naval Review* 4.1 (2008): 15.

¹² Fravel and Liebman, "Beyond the Moat," 66.

¹³ *Zhongguo Renmin Jiefangjun Haijun*, 中国人民解放军海军.

PLAN seems to be casting itself not only as a consumer of China's rapid economic growth, but as the protector of and potential contributor to that economic growth."¹⁴ The Strait of Malacca serves as the testing grounds for a more internationally-oriented Chinese naval agenda.

Military authorities are expanding the scope of China's "maritime rights and interests" (*haiyang quanyi*, 海洋权益) in order to reflect what they see as the PLAN's calling in the modern era. Liu Xuxian of the Academy of Military Sciences (*Junshi Kexue Yanjiuyuan*, 军事科学研究院, or AMS) argues that "[the PLAN's] main tasks in warfare are shifting from protecting the country's landmass towards maritime territory, from defeating an enemy attack in nearby waters towards protecting our country's rights and interests at sea."¹⁵ Trade, resource exploration, and law enforcement are just such interests, according to Zhang Shiping, also of AMS. He outlines a comprehensive naval architecture dedicated beyond China's coastal area, ranging from aircraft carriers to fishing and exploration ships, as included in "the basic tasks of our navy."¹⁶ These perspectives reveal that China understands *haiyang quanyi* to be a flexible term open to interpretation—one that the PLAN has used to frame its naval ambitions ideologically and broadly, as opposed to a concrete reactionary call for action against a particular issue. While the PLAN certainly has an organizational interest in arguing for the general expansion of the navy for budgetary reasons, such accounts lend strength to the notion that there is a genuine doctrinal development in the PLAN's strategic outlook.

China does not stand alone in seeking to defend its economy on the seas. The PLAN's shift in perspective shares strong similarities with the visions of other major maritime powers, including the United States. If China's statements are to be taken seriously, they represent a policy foray into major international stakes. This raises the question of whether China views its involvement as that of a stakeholder in a cohesive international order or simply as a defender of its own narrow share within the larger system. Trade stability may be a collective goal, but how that ideal is achieved by military means poses the potential for a security dilemma between China and the United States. Perceptions of naval coexistence are key in understanding how the relationship between the United States and China will proceed.

¹⁴ Fravel and Liebman, "Beyond the Moat," 75.

¹⁵ Liu Zhenhuan, et. al., "Zoujin haiyang shiji qiandai Zhongguo haijun," 走进海洋式机枪打中国海军 [Enter the New Century of the Ocean, Strengthen China's Navy] *Dangdai Haijun* 当代海军 1 (2000): 5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

The Strait of Malacca shines a light on China's sweeping naval doctrine and provides insights into the PLAN's view of competition with the United States. Some within the PLAN view the U.S. anti-terrorist agenda as a pretense for interference in the Strait. Chen Angang and Chen Wuming argue in *Modern Navy* (*Dangdai Haijun*, 当代海军), the PLAN's party committee publication, that the United States perceives "the entire world [as] a terrorist world," and that protecting security in the Strait of Malacca is the "perfect excuse for some countries [i.e. the United States] to interfere" in China's naval ambitions.¹⁷ Though this view may appear to be alarmist, such authors are not alone in their interpretations.¹⁸ Perhaps the Chinese navy ought to be concerned by a robust foreign military presence in the Strait of Malacca. Chen and Chen go on to say that "whoever controls the Malacca Strait can control China's strategic oil lifeline, and can thereby threaten China's energy security at any time."¹⁹ Such threats would certainly fall within the Chinese strategic vision of "maritime rights and interests" in its increasingly expanded sense.

The Staying Hand of Capacity and Business

Chinese concerns with American presence in the Strait of Malacca, while theoretically justifiable in terms of trade and energy stakes, lose traction in light of the real situation of what China and the United States are currently capable of doing as regional players. Even putting capacity aside, pragmatic analysis shows that there is ultimately little reason to fear a serious disruption of trade caused by the United States or China. The combination of these realities provides insight into the future of Sino-U.S. naval relations in the Strait.

Ambition may outpace ability in China's current naval situation. While credible and comprehensive sources of Chinese naval capacity are not readily provided

¹⁷ *Modern Navy* is treated herein as a general indicator of PLAN opinion, not an official source of policy. The publication is directly connected to the PLAN and written by PLAN officials, both military and civilian. As this study is concerned with both official policy and perception, it serves as a useful primary source to understand Chinese naval strategic perspectives beyond official rhetoric; Chen Angang and Chen Wuming, "Mei yu zai Malu jia haixia bushu jundui" [America Is Trying to Deploy Troops in the Malacca Strait] *Dangdai Haijun* 当代海军 7 (2004): 58.

¹⁸ See also Zhang Gang, "Dongnanya haishang tongdao anquan yu daguo boyi" 东南亚海上通道安全与大国博弈 [The Security of Southeast Asia's SLOCs and the Great Power Game], *Dangdai Haijun* 当代海军 7 (2006): 33, 35.

¹⁹ Chen and Chen, "Mei yu zai," 58.

²⁰ U.S. Department of Defense, "Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2013" (Washington: Department of Defense, 2013): 39.

by the Chinese government, U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) analyses illustrate that China's naval capacity in the Strait of Malacca, while growing, will remain modest for the foreseeable future. Notably, the DoD cites "limited logistical support" as "a key obstacle preventing the PLA Navy from operating more extensively beyond East Asia," including the Strait of Malacca and as far east as Guam.²⁰ Such arrangements would be critical to the refueling, restocking, and rearmament of naval operations that take place far away from the Chinese mainland. A U.S. Congressional Research Service report notes that China is beginning to address this challenge with a "places not bases" approach, wherein arrangements are made for naval voyages to make port in the Indo-Pacific region as needed.²¹ Although this has enabled recent naval tours by the PLAN, this type of access still "fall[s] short of U.S.-style agreements permitting the full spectrum of support from repair to re-armament," and could be subject to revision if China's allies in Southeast Asia and around the Indian Ocean perceive an overextension of Chinese interests as threatening.²² Finally, China's naval developments still remain primarily focused on the quality of its platforms, meaning that building new, modern technology from scratch remains a secondary avenue for naval expansion.²³

Compilations of U.S. Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) data indicate that from 2010 to 2020, China expects to increase its number of diesel attack submarines, nuclear-powered attack submarines, destroyers, and frigates by 8, 2, 7, and 7 ships, respectively. These numbers, though fairly unremarkable, are complemented by the PLAN's modernization agenda. ONI estimates that 75 percent of diesel attack submarines, 100 percent of nuclear-powered attack submarines, 85 percent of destroyers, and 85 percent of frigates will meet modern design standards by 2020, up from the year 2010 when only 50 percent, 33 percent, 50 percent, and 45 percent, respectively, qualified as "modern."²⁴ This confirms the notion that China's naval power expansion is focused on improving existing platforms, not dramatically expanding the gross tonnage of its navy. The implication of this reality is that power projection is simply not technologically possible right now.

²⁰ U.S. Department of Defense, "Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2013" (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2013): 39.

²¹ Ronald O'Rourke, *China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress* (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 2014): 35.

²² U.S. Department of Defense, "Annual Report to Congress," 39.

²³ O'Rourke, "China Naval Modernization," 3.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

China's naval systems are in the process of modernizing—a process which, if the calls for development found in Modern Navy are to be understood as more than bureaucratic posturing, is still somewhat neglected. Even once the drive for modernized platforms yields results, the PLAN is ultimately working with a finite number of ships sufficiently modernized to match up against advanced naval systems in the field. While sheer naval tonnage does not fully capture the capability of a navy, it is still an important indicator of the scope of the navy's possible operations.²⁵ In other words, without expanding its numbers, China will have a navy that is more skilled at certain existing combat strategies—such as anti-access area denial—but not necessarily in new forms of naval operations or in the scope of its presence.

Doubts regarding U.S. capacity in the Strait are focused less on their power as a military force and more on the international repercussions of a Malacca contingency. The United States may have extensive naval port access and power projection technology in the Pacific, but these are still not U.S. waters. Issues of sovereignty and interference remain salient for the littoral states of the Strait of Malacca. For instance, Malaysia and Indonesia vetoed a 2004 effort to place U.S. troops directly in the Strait, a rebuff succinctly summarized by the Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's quip: "I think we can look after our own area."²⁶ As mentioned previously, cooperation exists in the form of technology and training for anti-piracy and anti-terrorism measures. However, without a standing naval presence in the Strait beyond its existing arrangements and with limited plans for direct expansion, the United States does not possess the immediate capacity or clout to dictate who comes and goes in the Strait of Malacca.²⁷ The notion of the United States imposing its naval fleet stationed in Japan against the wishes of the littoral states without any immediate threat to the area is also extremely unlikely. It would take a major, most likely state-driven, threat to the Strait to warrant such drastic action.

Even if one were to suppose that China or the United States could block off the Strait of Malacca in the event of a larger conflict between the two powers, the likelihood of either doing so is mitigated by the vital trade that passes through the Strait, both in strategic goods such as energy resources and in the sheer mass of

²⁵ O'Rourke, "China Naval Modernization," 45-47.

²⁶ Vavro, "Piracy," 15; Sudha Ramachandran, "Divisions over Terror Threat in Malacca Straits," *Asia Times*, 16 June 2004.

²⁷ See the next section.

ships, as discussed above. No navy can perform an effective blockade on a trade route of this magnitude without seriously slowing the passage of third-party goods. Identification and inspection are too costly and slow.²⁸ If China were to attempt such an action to punish U.S. or Western markets, they would be hampering their very own flow of oil, incurring massive costs to efficiency beyond the disruption of trade. While the United States is less dependent on the Strait, there would still be similar unnecessary costs to trade as a result of slowing commercial shipping traffic, even if the effects on trade in and out of China provided a significant strategic advantage. Both nations would face equally strident international outcry over impeding global trade, not just from the littoral states whose sovereignty would be infringed, but also from industrial producer nations and recipient nations around the world. Though it is not inconceivable that China or the United States would take an economic hit to harm the other, such a contingency remains highly dubious.

The Trajectory of the PLAN and U.S. Navy in Malacca

With the current realities laid out and improbable events accounted for, the question remains: what does the future hold for China and the United States in the Strait of Malacca? While overt conflict will most likely be avoided, China will continue to improve its naval capabilities and understand that it is responsible not just for the defense of the Chinese mainland, but also for its growing trade interests abroad. This growing presence will not go unnoticed by the United States. The United States will seek to counter with increased naval concentration in both the Malacca Strait and the Western Pacific, particularly in places where the United States already has bases and agreements, as well as develop a growing sense of wariness for Chinese naval forces. The end result will be raised tensions in the region as a whole and perhaps even a comparative decline for the United States as the PLAN expands its operations and ability in the Strait at a relatively faster rate.

Chinese doctrinal position on *haiyang quanyi* has proven to be vague for the purpose of flexibility. The increasing rhetoric of the PLAN as a force to protect China's international interests may be more bark than bite right now, as is evident from the primary sources examined, but it will almost certainly solidify as the nation

²⁸ Fravel and Liebman, "Beyond the Moat," 72.

finds more of its economic activities focused abroad—including expanding trade routes, growing demand for natural resources, and even Chinese investments in high-priority regions like Africa and the Middle East.²⁹ If China is to understand itself as a global superpower, these arguments must sooner or later gain validity and yield greater percentages of military spending going to the PLAN's projects. An expanded Chinese naval capacity would enable more exploration and exploitation of natural resources in China's exclusive economic zone, as well as renewed maritime law conception and enforcement to accompany such initiatives. It would also place a high priority on the Strait of Malacca for Chinese influence in the form of greater standing provisions arrangements for naval forces passing through and perhaps even bases of operation in the long term. Nowhere are China's commercial maritime interests more pressing than at this chokepoint. In protecting the Malacca Strait, China would be stepping up as a power in its own right, capable of defending its own national interests far from home and providing international trade stability through this vital channel.

There is little the United States can do to change China's perception of international trade security, particularly in the case of the Strait of Malacca. President Obama's strategic rebalance to Asia has broadly included the U.S. Navy. Plans for future U.S. naval involvement in the Pacific include increasing the percentage of ships docked in the Pacific from 55 percent to 60 percent by 2020, placing the Navy's best personnel in the Pacific region, and expanding troop deployments in Guam, the Philippines, and Australia.³⁰ Yet these ventures are broad and will not curtail Chinese naval expansion in general or specifically in Malacca. On the contrary, they may actually encourage such balancing measures. Beyond stationing up to four Littoral Combat Ships—advanced models used in coastal missions—in Singapore by 2017, the United States has few options to improve its position relative to China's in the Strait of Malacca.³¹ Fortunately for the United States, it will maintain an unshaken absolute advantage in military terms over the Chinese for years to come, and if littoral states in the Strait view Chinese expansion as threatening, the United States may stand to gain greater diplomatic arrangements with these states as a

²⁹ Erik Lin-Greenberg, "Dragon boats: assessing China's anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden." *Defence & Security Analysis* 26, no. 2 (2010): 213-230.

³⁰ US Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington DC: Department of Defense, 2006), 47.

³¹ O'Rourke, "China Naval Modernization," 54.

counterbalance to the Chinese.³² In all, the United States is not likely to consider China's endeavors in the Strait of Malacca as an effort to become a responsible international stakeholder, but rather will feel the pressure of competition.

Conclusion

The Strait of Malacca's geopolitical importance serves as a focal point for the expanding presence of China and the United States in the Pacific. Measures against piracy and terrorism, though by no means concluded, have diminished in urgency in light of their own success. Protecting the steady trade that flows through the Strait is now at the center of attention. As Chinese naval doctrine expands to include trade security as a principal national concern, the People's Liberation Army Navy will have the chance to materially improve its standing in the Straits pursuant of that goal. The United States, though framed by an ambitious "rebalance," will continue its presence as an important contributor to the defense of the Strait more or less as usual without mitigating China's ability to expand its own influence.

In the context of this bilateral struggle, it is important to keep in mind the role the littoral states play in diplomatic and military dealings. Some commentators see the positions of Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore as rather difficult, buffeted on both sides by the jostling of international power players.³³ Yet in reality, they have demonstrated both room for cooperation and remarkable agency in maintaining their sovereignty on matters of Strait security and military presence. Going forward, these states potentially stand to gain by allowing competition for security services to bring in advanced technology, useful logistical insight, and training—all paid for by foreign powers.³⁴

Ultimately, the Strait of Malacca will continue to serve as a crucial international trade route. While Chinese expansion may raise American concerns, both powers will work to keep the Strait open and safe for the passage of commerce. However, if rising tensions prove stronger than the incentive of economic stability and competition boils over into conflict, the Strait of Malacca may prove dire indeed.

³² O'Rourke, "China Naval Modernization," 18, 27, 30, 44.

³³ Zubir, Mokhzani Zubir and Mohd Nizam Basiron, "The Strait of Malacca: The Rise of China, America's Intentions and the Dilemma of the Littoral States," *Maritime Studies* 141 (2005): 24.

³⁴ Umaña, *Threat Convergence*, 14.

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