



Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)

Forum for National Security Studies (FNSS)

Title:	BECOMING A SEA POWER IN EAST ASIA: CHINA'S QUEST FOR REGIONAL HEGEMONY
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The speaker, in presenting her paper on the subject, looked at the probability of China becoming a Maritime power through a theoretical prism and placed Kenneth Waltz's "Balance of Power" theory as a base while presuming that China is a continental power. If one were to compare the rise of China with that of the US, it would appear that China will face a challenge in becoming a sea power for the following reasons:

For China to become a regional hegemon it would require control of near sea, and access to open waters. However, China's drive to achieve this sea power status is problematic because China does not enjoy the advantages of insularity (of geography and strategy) like the US. The fact that the US faced little or no opposition as a state rising to its great power position was one factor that helped it to get there. However, any attempts of China to exert its influence in its nearby waters would be and is being met by severe opposition from the other Southeast Asian states, bandwagoning to counter its influence.



China's sea power potential is only as achievable as permitted by the regional balance of power politics and would never be realised beyond denying the US its freedom of intervention in China's immediate neighbourhood. This is because China's naval modernisation is primarily motivated by the immediate security risk, i.e. Taiwan (and by extension the US). Chinese coastal region accounts for about two third of China's GDP, and four of China's wealthy provinces fall in the vicinity of Taiwan. Therefore, in case of conflict, Taiwan would not need to project power deep inside China to incapacitate its economy and only needs to attack the East Coast. This Taiwan dilemma bears long term threats for China, if its ambition is to be a regional hegemon.

China is competing with the US to become a global power, and hence its political movements are also made keeping the US in mind. For the US, a rising China is a direct challenge to the US designed global order. The impact of a loss in Asia-Pacific would not only tarnish US reputation, but also devalue its importance as an ally. This is why the US maintains a strategic presence in Southeast Asia, with its Navy as well as through alliances with the various nations in the region. The presence of the US has kept the regional countries from developing military nuclear capabilities. In the absence of a security guarantor, imposing such a clause would be difficult and this would be detrimental for global security.

This competition between the two nations has inadvertently drawn the Southeast Asian nations into power play. The regional countries see profit (for the short term) in not containing or provoking China, while also profiting by tilting towards the US (long term), and this maintains the status quo. This balance will only falter if China projects its power to command the disputed territory, or the US (tired of the costs involved) pulls its naval forces all the way back to Australia or Philippines. The latter move will give berth for China to freely command the adjacent open sea, while the former will test the will and power of the region. However, the growing regional alliances between the Southeast Asian nations are a clear indication in the shift in reception of China's hard power. The shift suggests balancing rather than bandwagoning.

If China is willing to replace the US as a guarantor of open sea lanes in East Asia, there is little evidence to prove that Chinese economy can sustain such a cost. Moreover, the neighbouring nations would resist and hesitate to accept such a proposal, and might try to collectively fill the vacuum left by the US. Given the significant benefits that China has enjoyed due to the US military presence in East Asia, China might want to keep the arrangement as it is, while exempting the US from operating in China's neighbourhood, raising further doubts if China actually wants to be a Sea Power?

