

# CHINA AND RUSSIA: THE NAVAL PROJECTION OF LAND POWERS

Paulo Fagundes Visentini<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

China and Russia, from a geopolitical perspective, are large continental states (the first and the fourth, respectively), characterized by their configuration as land powers. However, recently, through its development and extroversion of its economy, China has built a naval power with a world presence. The Russian Federation, on the other hand, which lost much of the naval and coastal power that the USSR had, is trying to rebuild its capacity for maritime defense and exploration of the new Arctic Route, but still with limited global projection. By analyzing the recent naval projection of these traditional land powers, the article seeks to discuss the extent to which traditional geopolitics is reaching its zenith and initiating its own overcoming. This is part of a survey carried out within the framework of the Edital Álvaro Alberto (Instituto Pandiá Calógeras of the Ministry of Defense and CNPq) on the presence of China and Russia in the South Atlantic and on the west coast of Africa.

## China: Geopolitical Position and Naval Projection

The main objective is to present and analyze the naval policy of the People's Republic of China for the 21st century from a structural strategic perspective. Like Brazil, China is a country with continental dimensions and an extensive coastal region, in which an important part of its economy is concentrated, as well as the largest portion of its immense population. The combination of these two aspects reveals the importance that the recent naval modernization process played in the country's economic development. The economic opening process promoted by Deng Xiaoping since 1979, the strong presence of the United States in the vicinity of Taiwan and the developments of the Gulf War on the profile of war in the 21st century can be considered the

---

<sup>1</sup> Full Professor of International Relations at UFRGS and at the Postgraduate Programs in Military Sciences at IMM/ECEME, Brazil. Maria Gabriela Vieira, CNPq fellow of the project, collaborated in the research.

main drivers of a more active maritime strategy.

It is necessary to consider that, despite the continental territorial dimensions and the coastal extension, the situation of Brazil and China are very different in geopolitical terms. Brazil has an “open” (unhindered) coast to the Atlantic Ocean, although less extensive than the Chinese. China is more “wetted” in Asia and its access to the World Ocean (via the Pacific and the Indian Ocean) is limited by island rings controlled by other nations (Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, United States, Philippines and others from the South China Sea).

Thus, Popular China suffers from a certain “siege complex”, as the extroversion of its economy demands wide maritime access to export its goods and import raw materials and energy (especially oil). The more its economy globalizes, the more China seeks to strengthen its Navy, in parallel with the expansion of its Merchant Navy, and gain footholds in all Oceans. It is very important for the analyst *to understand the Chinese perception of the problem*. It is from this that the strategies of the “Empire of the Center” are formulated.

Since the end of the 20th century, there has been debate about the role (and consequent responsibilities) that China could assume in the International System in a context of disintegration of the former Soviet Union and the instability of American unipolarity. After a few decades, multipolarity emerges as a new reality – since 2016, according to Mearsheimer (2019) – and China is certainly one of its poles of greatest economic, political and military strength (Dufourcq 2017). To reach this position, however, it was necessary to combine economic reforms with a reform in the dominant thought (essentially terrestrial) regarding the formulation of naval policies and strategies in the country. Thus, it is of interest to both academics and military personnel, diplomats, analysts and decision makers to analyze the path taken by the People’s Republic of China to the status of maritime power in the 21st century.

## Geopolitical Position of the People’s Republic of China

China is the largest country in East Asia and the third largest country by land area in the world – 9.6 million square kilometers. It is also the most populous country in the world with 1.4 billion inhabitants, 20% of the world’s population. It has borders with 14 countries and a coastline of 14,500 kilometers, being delimited by its South and East seas, in addition to Taiwan, the Korean Peninsula and Japan. The country has more than four millennia of historical state continuity and, since 1949, it has been a Socialist People’s

Republic under the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CCP). It is important to emphasize that the regime's legitimacy is based on two elements of collective perception: the recovery of *national sovereignty* (after 150 years of external interference) and the increase in popular consumption with the reforms and recent development. The regime's authoritarianism is similar to that of the imperial phase and there is little receptivity to liberal democracy, except in Hong Kong, which has a distinguished history and constitution.

Unlike most countries on the periphery and semiperiphery of the International System, China was never colonized by foreign powers. However, this did not mean the absence of attempts to subjugate her. The largest and most significant of these occurred in the 19th century, when the British Empire began to promote its economic interests by military means. The Opium Wars (1839 and 1856) deeply marked China's relationship with the West and also with the seas and oceans – since the enemy was the greatest naval power at the time. Despite the humiliation and social and economic wear and tear caused by the Unequal Treaties, the British advances also meant a break with the old Chinese domestic structures and awareness by the ruling elite (Epstein 1980). Later, the Japanese threat also came from the sea.

For a long period, the Chinese dragon remained with its forces focused on its internal affairs (the *Chinese Civil War*, the proclamation of the *Republic of China*, the resistance to the Japanese occupation of 1931-45 and, later, to the *People's Republic of China*), resulting in the adoption of an isolated position in the International System.

During the second half of the 20th century, this posture of Socialist China gradually gave way to a limited role in international relations: the PRC began to seek alliances with the periphery – Asian, African and Latin American countries (Spence 1995). They would be of paramount importance for the country during the years of the Cold War (Non-Aligned Movement), which would still go through two important events before replacing Nationalist China (Taiwan) in the UN Security Council in 1971, being, then, accepted by the International Community: the *Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution*.

Deng Xiaoping's rise to power in 1976 after Mao Zedong's death represented a new phase for the PRC. Among the main strategies during the period in which Deng was in power, the following stand out: the *Four Modernizations* (economic, technological-scientific, agricultural and *military*) and the *Economic Opening* – political-economic efforts seeking to retake China's place of greatness in the world – and which consequently impact contemporary international relations.

All the events mentioned above were essential for the process of

transforming the “Middle Empire” into a Great Power, the country developed both raw power (*hard power*) and *soft power*. The efforts of Chinese leaders and diplomats in the constant (re)affirmation of the peaceful character of the Chinese development process – including in the field of military modernization – deserve to be highlighted. In recent years, however, Chinese *hard power* has raised concerns for its neighbors (Japan and India, for example) and for traditional Western powers (US and France, for example). The growing dependence of the global economy on the Chinese economy and the development of military capabilities (including nuclear) with a much more offensive character have raised doubts about Chinese *soft power*.

It is undeniable that China today plays a leading role in the Great Powers game and, so far, does not seem to want to change the rules of this game. Parallel to the moment of crisis of the *Liberal International Order* and of questions about the viability of maintaining the structures, institutions, values, and of the US hegemony itself, opportunities arise for China (and other powers) to renew the current order or establish a new international order.

## Chinese Naval Strategy

To analyze the current Chinese Naval Strategy it is necessary to understand the military modernization movement as a whole. This process is, above all, the result of internal historical processes and China’s interaction with the international environment. According to Kondapalli (2000), the history of Chinese maritime activity goes back more than twenty centuries. However, the Industrial Revolution that took place in Western countries ended up making the Chinese navy obsolete and, consequently, contributing to the vulnerability of its territory. This asymmetry of maritime power is evident in the course of the Opium Wars<sup>2</sup>. Western and Japanese imperial forays into China’s coastal region and the flight of nationalists to Taiwan shaped the elaboration of the PRC’s maritime strategy throughout the 20th century. Taiwan survived in 1949-50 because China did not have an armada.

The People’s Liberation Army (PLAN) Navy has adopted a *Coastal Defense Strategy* for more than three decades. The emphasis on safeguarding the coast and its nearby seas and defending the interior from external threats makes China’s defensive posture evident. To accomplish these objectives, PLAN had a surface fleet without great defense or attack capabilities. Three-

---

2 Full Professor of International Relations at UFRGS and at the Postgraduate Programs in Military Sciences at IMM/ECEME. Maria Gabriela Vieira, CNPq fellow of the project, collaborated in the research.

quarters of the submarines used until the late 1990s dated back to the 1950s (CSIS 2019). The Coastal Defense Strategy reflected the strategic thinking of the time in China: prioritizing land power over naval or air power – also in line with the National Defense Strategy (People’s War). The Sino-Soviet rupture and the Chinese economic opening had a great impact on the elaboration of a new naval strategy for the PRC. Thus, between the 1970s and 1980s, fears of Soviet expansionism sparked growing debates about the importance of a naval doctrine consistent with Chinese interests.

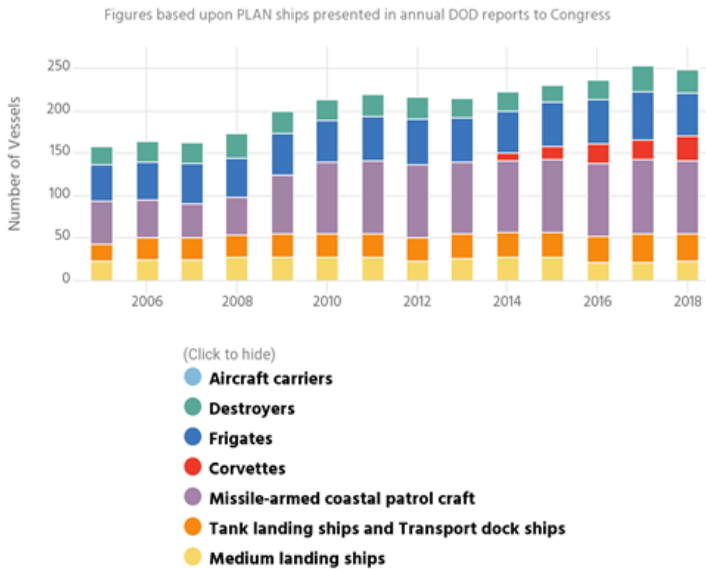
According to Kondapalli (2000) and Brisset (2018), in 1986 the PLAN abandoned the Coastal Defense Strategy and started to adopt an *Advanced/Active Defense Strategy (Offshore)*, seeking a naval projection beyond its coastline. More than ever it was necessary to modernize the obsolete Chinese navy. One of the big names within the Chinese summit responsible for this new phase of China at sea was Liu Huaqing, who crafted a three-phase modernization strategy that would transform PLAN into a navy with global projection capabilities by 2040. The first phase (until the 2000s) would aim to strengthen existing forces to control inland waters and deter regional threats (Japan and the South China Sea). The second phase (until 2020) would aim to build and purchase new vessels (including aircraft carriers and new technologies) in order to increase offshore combat capability, expand maritime control to Guam and Indonesia, and project beyond the Western Pacific – exploring other oceans. The third phase (until 2040) would have as its main objective to transform the PLAN into a blue water navy, with combat capability and global surveillance (Kondapalli 2000; Brisset 2018).

The strategic thinking that shapes the role of the PRC today is also a result of the contributions of Zhang Loanzhong. In 1988, he defined three possible perimeters for the allocation of defense forces both for modernization and for further action: (i) inland; (ii) medium; and (iii) abroad. Brisset (2018) delimited Beijing’s efforts for naval modernization (and subsequent projection) into two axes. The *first axis* is marked mainly by the control of the interior seas – Chinese natural projection area, and, therefore, referring to the country’s sovereignty. The *second axis*, in turn, would be its “pearl necklace” or “Maritime Silk Route” (to Africa, the Middle East and Europe) – important areas in economic, strategic and diplomatic terms. The first axis would incorporate the inner and middle perimeters and the second would be basically the outer perimeter.

As far as the South China Sea is concerned, the Chinese interest is not just territorial domination for economic purposes. More important is the geopolitical dimension, in an attempt to have a presence in the connection with the Indian Ocean (through the strategic Malacca and Sunda Straits) and

the Pacific Ocean, south of Taiwan, skirting the ring of islands limiting the Chinese naval projection. The speed and efficiency with which China expands or builds islands in the region, with naval and air bases, is noteworthy. Even the fishing activity is carried out by members of the popular militia in plain clothes, and it is not just an economic activity (Tertrais 2018). But in the region there are several diplomatic tensions with Southeast Asian nations such as the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Vietnam, now close to the United States. The greatest tension is on the Spratleys and Scarborough Reefs, in addition to the Paracels Islands. Chinese naval projection will be further developed in the next section.

**Figure 1 – PLAN Surface Fleet Discrimination**



The change in naval strategy can also be understood as a response to the “power vacuum” left by the Soviet withdrawal from the region (Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam) and the partial withdrawal of the US from the Philippines. Thus, two new potential threats were posed to China: the expansionism of Western countries and their attempts to increase influence in the Asia-Pacific region; and attempts to supplant regional leadership in Japan and Vietnam as well as nationalists in Taiwan. In this sense, having the ability to control (and win an eventual war) on its coast (MSC and MLC) involved modernizing its

navy<sup>3</sup> and its strategic thinking. In addition, the perception of many Chinese officials that wars in the 21st century would be local and of high technological intensity corroborated the lobby of those who prioritized the development and acquisition of light vessels, but capable of attacking, ensuring an efficient mobile defense (Kondapalli 2000).

Finally, it can be said that the main guidelines of strategic thinking developed in the late 1980s are being implemented by PLAN. Since 2012, the idea of the People's Republic of China as a Maritime Power has been repeatedly strengthened. In the recent *China's 2019 Defense White Paper*, the CCP again draws attention to the need to develop an increasingly strong and modern Navy capable of operating in deep/blue waters. And, unlike Russia, such initiatives are supported by a growing economy.

## Chinese Naval Projection: Challenges and Limitations

The seas and oceans are essential for human activity in the 21st century. According to Admiral Dufourcq (2011), two aspects must be considered to analyze the movements of naval power projection in recent decades: (i) the discovery of new strategic resources in the oceans (notably on the South American and African coasts); and (ii) the emergence of new actors (multipolarity). Furthermore, it mentions three challenges to be faced by countries when formulating their naval strategies: the demographic challenge, the ecological challenge and the economic challenge. Once again, this opens up the possibility of establishing a new form of global governance in the oceans, which incorporates the demands for "territorialization"<sup>4</sup> and sovereignty of the seas and the rules established in the 1990s. Regarding the constraints and limitations to Chinese naval projection, we highlight the US presence close to the territorial seas of China (either by the Korean Peninsula or by Japan) and the possibility of balancing and containing Russia and India

---

3 Regarding the modernization of the Chinese Navy, it is interesting to note that the process was initially marked by the purchase and exchange of technology (and of the vessels themselves) via agreements with countries in the region (USSR, followed by Japan and South Korea). However, the Chinese government has always been aware of the importance of developing such a strategic sector locally and has spared no effort to do so. Thus, with a lot of reverse engineering, the RPC has managed to maintain a fast pace of shipbuilding – with an emphasis on the construction of its third aircraft carrier (the first not based on Soviet models). An interesting fact to be highlighted is the exchange between the shipbuilding sectors for commercial and military purposes, which is not very common, but which for the CCP represents an incentive in the transfer of technology. Three-quarters of shipbuilding (commercial and military) is dominated by the state-owned China Shipbuilding Industry Corporation and the China State Shipbuilding Corporation – which have a total of six shipyards across the country (CSIS 2019).

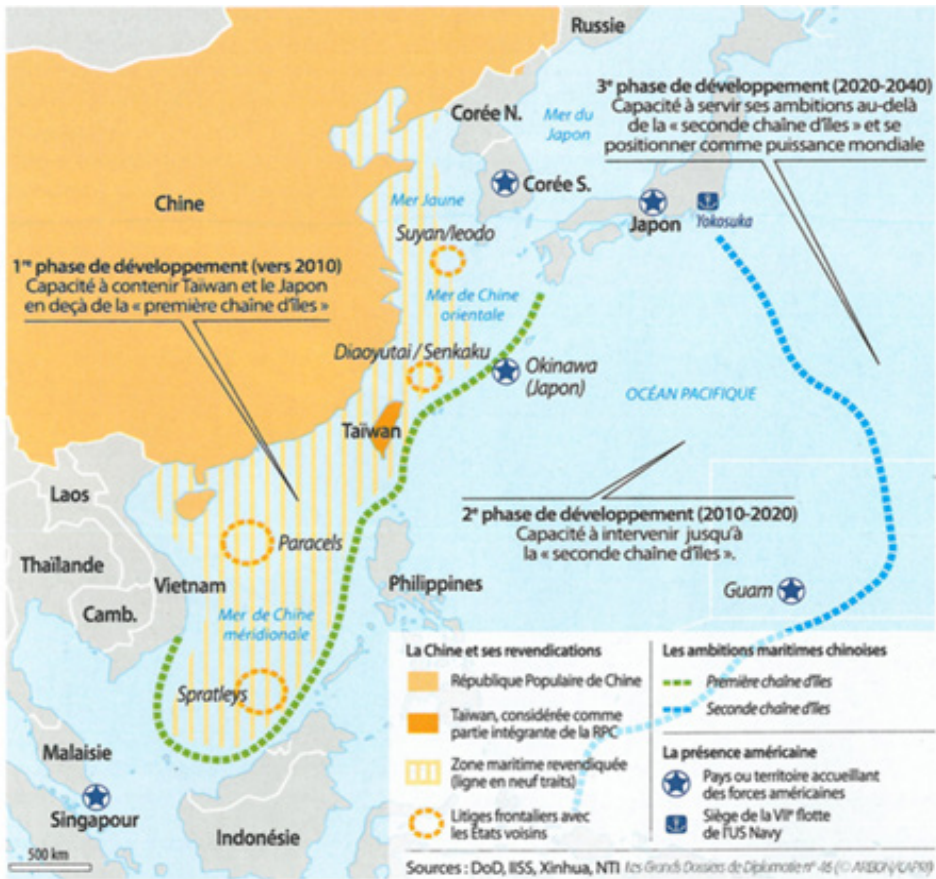
4 Defined by Dufourcq (2011) as "new sea sovereignty", the process of "territorialization" is related to the discovery and search for appropriation of new wealth.

- on the external plane - and the limitations in terms of personnel (training and qualification) and energy – internally (Brisset 2018).

At the end of the 20th century, China showed concern regarding the scarcity of natural resources, and this fear was one of the motivators for its military modernization. It would be part of the Chinese Naval Strategy not only the defense of its strategic resources, but also the search for new ones – as well as the other Great Powers of the International System. While much of its efforts are focused on protecting its coast, as has already been demonstrated, Beijing has also sought tools and capabilities to reach beyond its shores. Loanzhong's outer perimeter, or Brisset's second axis of action (2018), would be the main guidelines for PLAN's projection towards the first chain of islands – or what Beijing called the *Blue Territories of China*. Both reflect China's aspirations to possess maritime power with global operational capability. Although strong maritime power is considered a prerequisite for a Great Power, Chinese decision makers are well aware that the promotion of their interests must be accompanied by international responsibilities. It is by condensing these Chinese aspirations and fears that in 2013 the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was launched, a project on a transcontinental scale with the central objective of improving connectivity and cooperation and, thus, promoting economic development.



Figure 2 – Chinese Maritime Claims



BRI projects China's economic (financing of large infrastructure works and opening markets for Chinese products) and military power (demonstrating that the country has the means to defend its interests beyond its coasts). It is important to highlight that this initiative is not just a set of infrastructure projects, but one of the main vectors of Chinese foreign policy and its Grand Strategy. The ultimate goal of this ambitious project is to build a new and alternative political, economic and security system, called *Community of Common Destiny for Humanity*. In this system, China would be positioned at the center (Nantulya 2019).

The Chinese projection towards the African continent is mainly through BRI: China seeks to help African countries overcome the infrastructure bottleneck (railways, highways, ports and airports) and accelerate their

economic development process. On the other hand, geostrategic returns are expected for both Africa and the PRC, such as the case of *Walvis Bay* in Namibia, in which financial investments in ports were followed by military agreements with the ELP Navy. Despite its important presence in the countries of the West African coast, the priority for the projection of its forces, so far, is in the Pacific and Indian oceans.

It has been increasingly difficult for Chinese diplomacy to ensure the peaceful intentions of its modernization and actions, as is evident in recent publications by American think tanks regarding Chinese naval projection:

In addition to building a modern Blue Water Navy, the PRC has taken a wide range of destabilizing actions that pose a growing threat to global security. Among these actions are the construction of naval air stations in the South China Sea, including the Mischief Reef [Scarborough], located within the US-ally Philippine Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ); its declaration of an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea near Japan; its claims to sovereignty over the Senkaku Islands; and its total repudiation of the authority of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA), the oldest arbitral body under international law in the world. Such threatening actions also include China's growing naval operations in the Western Pacific, South Pacific and Indian Ocean; the Mediterranean Sea and the Baltic Sea; the Arctic and the Antarctic; and finally the Atlantic Ocean. These actions are empirical indicators of China's future evil intentions and actions (Fanell 2019).

It is extremely important for the continuity of the Chinese Strategy for the construction of a Blue Water Navy that its soft power is strengthened in the same measure as its hard power. Even with a naval power still limited compared to the US power - there are 11 US aircraft carriers against only 1 Chinese commissioned aircraft carrier (CSIS 2019) -, to avoid tensions and clashes with the other Great Powers, as well as with their Asian neighbors, remains a priority for the Chinese government. Especially when the rapid quantitative and qualitative expansion of the Chinese Navy constitutes a picture that recalls the German naval expansion in the years before World War I, challenging the Royal Navy.

The training of qualified personnel still falls short of the capacity to build ships, but as China has demonstrated in all fields, it can quickly overcome this situation. The growing Chinese naval presence in all oceans stems from the internationalization of its economy, but it is accompanied by actions considered legitimate such as combating piracy, humanitarian aid (such as hospital ships) and rescuing thousands of Chinese workers, as occurred in Libya in 2011. Hence, the presence of a Chinese Navy is

relatively “camouflaged” amidst the various naval activities. Interesting is the establishment of a Chinese naval military base in Djibouti, together with several countries, having its diplomatic and strategic effect diluted in the face of “public opinion”.

Finally, the predatory extractive activity of international marine resources is another source of concern for the international community. In addition, large Chinese investments in poor countries are silently multiplying support points around the world, while competitors such as India see limited access to their strategic environment. Investment in port structures also takes place in Africa and even in Europe, such as Athens/Pireo, which has become a hub for *Made in China* products and services.

There is a Chinese Grand Strategy, and naval power is increasingly occupying a privileged position within it, which is considered the greatest threat in the near future (Interviews with Admirals Antonio Silva Ribeiro and Jean Dufourcq). It is also worth reflecting on the factions of the CCP that seek to shape such a strategy and whether Chinese naval power is tactical or strategic: the New Silk Road would be the basis for the construction of a Eurasian continental and terrestrial space challenging the Anglo-Saxon naval powers?

## Russian Federation: Geopolitics and Naval Projection

The Russian State, despite having an immense coastline, has as its basic characteristic being a land power of continental dimensions. There are certain historical and geopolitical conditions that did not change during the three phases of the country’s evolution, the Russian Empire (until 1917), the Soviet Union (USSR, until 1991) and the Russian Federation (until now). The legacy of the Cold War, when the USSR constituted the “Second Superpower”, has contaminated some contemporary analyzes of the real power of Russia led by Vladimir Putin. Thus, it is of fundamental importance to separate the objective reality, vital for analysts and decision makers, from the media discourse, dictated by political, ideological and strategic needs, aimed at the lay public.

Russia has limited capacity to project power outside its “near abroad” (former Soviet Republics), even though it retains, residually, certain deterrent vectors inherited from the USSR, in addition to being a Permanent Member of the UN Security Council. This is particularly visible with regard to Naval Power, as will be seen later. In geopolitical terms, Russia has three determining peculiarities: 1) it is the state whose nerve center is located further north

(except for small Finland), with a large part of its territory within the Arctic Circle and a transition zone to the east; 2) it is the largest country, with continental characteristics, inserted in the Eurasian space, connecting the strategic regions of Europe and East-Central Asia; 3) despite the vastness of the territory and coastline, Russia has very limited access to the World Ocean, due to the maritime freeze and the configuration of the seas to which it has access, which generally have their exits controlled by adversaries. The partial melting of the polar ice cap does not qualitatively alter this last factor.

## Russian Geopolitical Position

Russia is still the largest state in the world, with 17 million km<sup>2</sup> of land surface (the USSR had 22.8 million km<sup>2</sup>) and 7.5 million km<sup>2</sup> of maritime Exclusive Economic Zone and 40 thousand km of coastline (due to the cut profile and the existence of numerous islands) (Delanoë 2018). However, it is a terrestrial power, which has been incorporating almost uninhabited territories and decaying States. After centuries of Mongolian domination, the objective of the leaders, since Ivan the Terrible (16th century), was a kind of “defensive expansion” with the purpose of obtaining *strategic depth*, with the distance from borders. Russia does not have “natural borders” or geographic features that can demarcate them. The aim was not economic expansionism, but to protect Muscovy from the Teutonic Knights, Poles, Swedes, Turks and Mongols.

Thus, a country with very limited resources formed a Eurasian continental empire, which spans 11 time zones from the Baltic to the Pacific, constituting Mackinder’s geopolitical heartland, which connected Europe and Asia by land. This explains England’s strategic rivalry, which controlled maritime spaces.

The Russian giant, however, lacked access to the *warm and open seas*. Its coastline was frozen most of the year or was located in narrow seas whose access to the Oceans was controlled by opposing powers. This was the case with the Black Sea, as the Bosphorus Strait was dominated by the Turks (and the two exits from the Mediterranean by the British), and the Baltic Sea, controlled by Scandinavian powers and easily blocked by the British navy. The White Sea has only a narrow corridor between the ice shelf and the coast of Norway and the Japan Sea has its outlets controlled by the Japanese (Ewitss 2019). Hence the Russian insistence on maintaining control of the three small Kuril islands, claimed by Japan, and which give access to the Pacific Ocean through a corridor under Russian control. The Caspian is an inland

and closed sea.

This reality had profound consequences for Russia, which for centuries was on the sidelines of the great world trade circuits, which would also allow the entry of innovation. The result was isolation and delay. When Peter the Great defeated the Swedes and gained access to the Baltic, he immediately built the city of St. Petersburg, which became the capital and was “open to Europe” and progress, and created a fleet. Catherine the Great did the same for the Turks and the Black Sea. But the leaders who followed did not follow through on these initiatives. Subsequently, circumstances linked to the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 led to the overwhelming defeat at the Naval Battle of Tsushima. The Baltic fleet, which had covered 14 thousand km, with immense difficulties in supplying coal (England supported Japan), was sunk in a quick fight.

It was the first time that a European state was defeated by an Asian. And the consequences for Russian strategic thinking were profound because, due to rivalry with England, the Baltic fleet had to bypass the British Isles and the African continent. Then came the First World War and the Russian fleet was stranded in its ports, and then the Soviet Revolution, starting a new cycle of isolation. Russia lost most of the Baltic coast and the capital was transferred back to Moscow for security reasons, with the navy being relegated to the role of coast guard. In World War II, history repeated itself and Stalin’s vision of the primacy of land defense was maintained. But two situations provoked an internal debate: the difficulty in guaranteeing the sending of aid to the Spanish Republic by sea during the Civil War (1936-1939) and the inability to contribute to the protection of Anglo-American convoys that transported aid to the USSR through the north during the German invasion, which angered Churchill (Fairhall 1971).

In the passage from the 1950s to the 1960s, the voluntarist Krushov developed a truly world-wide policy and commissioned Admiral Gorshkov to create a navy for the World Ocean. The Cuban crisis in 1961-62, with the fiasco of the Missile Gap (which led to the overthrow of Krushov in 1964) and the logistical-security difficulty of guaranteeing the transport of supplies to the island reinforced this concept. In addition to maintaining a limited fleet of surface ships equipped with missiles, a squadron of nuclear submarines also equipped with missiles was planned, capable of responding to a virtual US atomic attack. It was a response to the emergence of Polaris missiles in the USA in 1960, which could be launched by submarines without the need to surface (Lovett 2010). Part of Russian nuclear submarines circulated permanently in several oceans, including near the coast of the United States. This was only realized in the late 1960s by Brezhnev (Fairhall 1971; Gorshkov

1983).

It was a strategic, allegedly deterrent, resource that is still in place in the new post-Soviet Russia, albeit with a smaller fleet. Thus, there was a certain strategic balance in the contact zone between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Warsaw Treaty Organization, and Moscow's attention turned to other scenarios.

During the Brezhnev period (1964-82) the Soviet projection for the Third World (Asia, Middle East, Africa and Latin America) expanded a lot, both for diplomatic-strategic reasons and due to the emergence of several revolutionary regimes. In a framework of growing and intense competition with China, the USSR supported almost all of these regimes, which would have profound political, economic and military implications for Moscow. In naval terms, the Pacific Fleet gained priority, as it served as a containment for China and had access to the Indian Ocean, where the Soviet Union cooperated with India. From there, the connection with the Middle East and Africa was also possible. Although the Soviet Navy did not get involved in conflicts, there were gains such as strategic presence and the exploitation of the advantages offered by the establishment of port facilities in "sister or friendly countries". It was not just the traditional policy of "showing the flag" but getting support points (Evitss 2019).

However, this extended military presence and aid to pro-socialist regimes (involved in local wars), from Nicaragua to Vietnam, from Angola to Afghanistan, came at a cost that seriously affected the Soviet economy. The USSR's GDP was approximately 50% that of the US, and Moscow lacked such prosperous allies as Japan and Western Europe. Worse still, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union had become an aging, stagnant and structurally corrupt elite (the *Nomenklatura*), with the population increasingly discontented. The strategic-military heyday of the USSR in the late 1970s, with its missiles, squadrons, satellites and immense ground forces in eastern Europe, concealed a giant with mud feet, which could not withstand the reaction of the United States and its allies in the 1980s (Westad 2007).

## Russian Federation Naval Strategy

There was an ongoing debate within the Soviet Navy about the role of a surface fleet, whether or not to build aircraft carriers, and about the underwater weapon. The predominance of army lobbying and land defense doctrine, the role of ICBMs (Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles) and strategic aviation, as well as budgetary constraints, meant that the Soviet navy remained secondary.

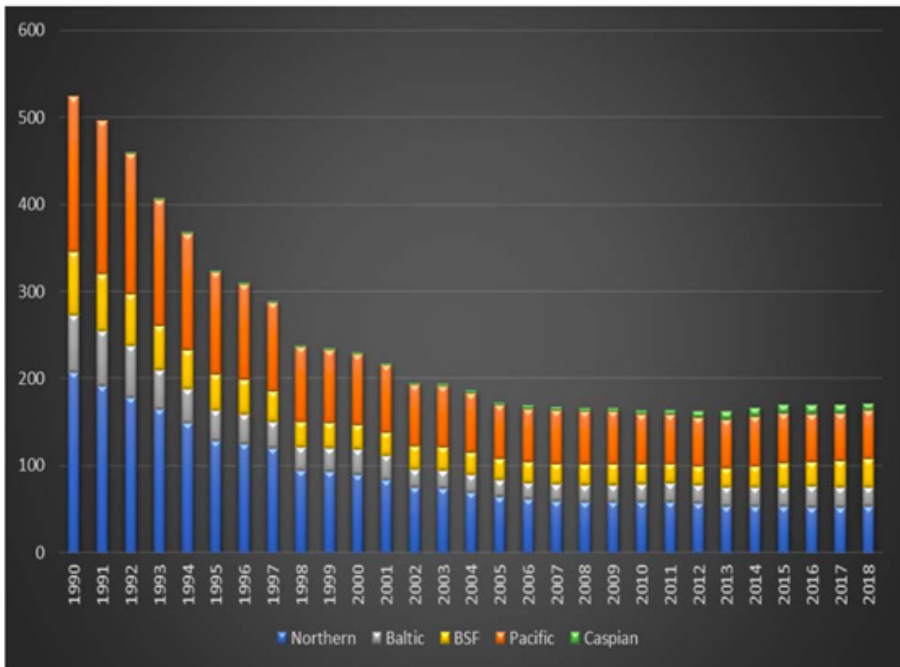


And Gorbachev's rise to the leadership of the USSR, seeking to relax relations with NATO, further aggravated the situation in the navy. Cutting military resources and seeking diplomatic accommodation with the West especially hit the fleet, which was costly. Basically, the navy had a role more aimed at giving visibility and prestige to the Soviet Armed Forces as an instrument of a global superpower, displaying it as a complete power (Lovett 2010).

The collapse of the Soviet Union, from 1989 to 1991, dismantled the Soviet geopolitical space, eliminated an instrument of national cohesion (the Communist Party), and generated the near collapse of the Armed Forces. While the navy rusted in ports (aircraft carriers sold before completion), major aeronautical projects were abandoned and the army had a humiliating performance in the Chechnya War. The fourteen years of Gorbachev and Yeltsin's government witnessed the quantitative and qualitative decline of the Russian navy, in a context of political disorganization and economic crisis. The excellent thesis of US Navy serviceman Jonathan Eitss (defended at the Naval Postgraduate School), as shown in the chart below, underscores the decay of the Russian navy. Even in the initial years of the Putin government, with the decommissioning of old ships, the Russian armada continued to decline until it stabilized in 2005.

The Russian Federation was the successor state to the USSR, occupying the Soviet seat on the UN Security Council and enjoying the status of recognized nuclear power. The country also inherited instruments of power such as an aerospace and defense industry with its own technology, in addition to immense energy resources (oil, gas and uranium) and minerals, including noble ores for cutting-edge technologies. However, the country is dependent on commodity exports, has no consumer goods industries, its population is aging and declining, and its borders are difficult to control. Worse still, unlike China, the new Russia does not have a *national identity* or elements that articulate power, as was the case with the Communist Party. Power is concentrated in the State, which has declined a lot in terms of cohesion in relation to the Soviet, and Putin has to bet a lot on personal power, controlling a caucus of deputies, which does not have the strength of a political party (Monaghan 2017). Likewise, he permanently seeks a synthesis of identity between the Russian Czarist Empire, the Soviet Union and the Orthodox Church. The mix of national symbols is impressive.

Figure 2 – Russian Naval Combatents by Fleet (1990-2018)



The first objective in terms of Defense is the so-called Near Abroad, the former Soviet internal space, except for the Baltic countries. The creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States, the defense and security cooperation agreements and the Constitution of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO, with China, the ex-Soviet Central Asian States and, more recently, India and Pakistan), as well as the Eurasian Economic Union (Eurasian Economic Union) demonstrate a Eurasian regional vocation, superior to the world projection. Next, NATO's eastward expansion represents a structural concern for Kremlin strategists, as the former Warsaw Pact countries and former Soviet Baltic republics have been integrated into the Western military bloc, bringing it closer to the nerve center of Russia. The almost obsessive preoccupation with a "siege", which already existed during the powerful Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, was aggravated by the limitations of the current Russian Federation.

According to Evitss, the Kremlin considered itself particularly threatened at three times: NATO military action against Yugoslavia/Serbia/Kosovo in 1999, US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and, especially, the Ukrainian crisis in 2004 and 2014, which he saw as "Western meddling". According to him, "Moscow routinely interprets NATO actions as provocative, but Russia unleashes actions that may be considered dangerous and even warrior-like,



creating a growing risk of miscalculations by the military forces” (Eitviss 2019, 22 ). Thus, Russia’s biggest concern is with its strategic environment. However, the 2014 Ukrainian crisis brought about a change of perspective. While the West considers the annexation of the Crimean peninsula the biggest problem, Moscow felt even more threatened by the change that took place in Ukraine, fearing its accession to the European Union or, worse, to NATO. One of the consequences was to seek to project power outside the region, as a way to obtain a better bargaining position and strategic balance. This was felt through a greater naval presence in the North Atlantic and in the Syrian conflict.

In 2001, the document *The Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation 2020* was prepared, updated in 2015 (Maritime, 2001). Originally it was a proposal that did not have the means to be fully materialized, but it reorganized the Russian navy, with the constitution of the North Fleet (Arctic and North Atlantic), the Baltic Fleet, the Black Sea Fleet, the Pacific Fleet and of the Caspian Sea Flotilla. Undoubtedly, the priority is the first, due to the resources allocated, such as new nuclear submarines replacing obsolete models, both for their presence in NATO waters and in the partial melting Arctic ice cap<sup>5</sup>.

But the annexation of Crimea altered the geopolitics of the Black Sea, allowing Russia a greater prominence in that Sea and projection of power to the eastern Mediterranean Sea. In addition to the presence of air and aides and special ground units deployed in Syria, the Russian navy’s use of the Tartus naval base is a very strong signal<sup>6</sup>. It is necessary to take into account the change in Turkey’s position, which, due to the new regional strategic reality, moved away from the USA (although it remains in NATO) and towards Russia, and the Russian-Iranian alliance. Thus, in the case of the region, the Russian navy is not only “showing the flag”, but is effectively present militarily.

## Russian Naval Projection and Its Limitations in The World Ocean

In 2010 the Russian government launched the document *Mirovoi Okean Oceanographic Program* (World Ocean), which projects the objectives and shipbuilding until 2035. In addition to the security aspects already

---

<sup>5</sup> There are oil and sovereignty disputes in the region, made even more explicit by President Donald Trump’s recent proposal to buy Danish Greenland by the United States.

<sup>6</sup> See Alexandra Paléologue. *La Méditerranée: un mer sous surveillance*, in *Diplomatie. Mers et Océans, géopolitique et Géostratégie*. Paris: Août-Septembre 2018. The author is a French military, in charge of Missions.

mentioned, what stands out are the economic objectives, such as the exploitation of natural minerals and living resources in territorial waters and non-sovereign areas of the World Ocean.

Here is a crucial methodological challenge for the strategic and historical analyst: *what is cause and what is consequence?* Many of the actions and reactions of Putin's government (or "regime") stem from the Russian Federation's internal and external weaknesses, not just a growing structurally based strength. A more detailed view shows a Russia that feels cornered and region in a determined but dangerous way, amid difficulties in the economic, demographic and governability areas. Andrew Monaghan's *Power in Modern Russia* (2017), conceived during a course at the NATO Defense College (Rome), demonstrates in detail the internal precariousness of the "Putin system".

This becomes even more visible when the country is compared to China's growing economic-military power, which has direct consequences for the expansion of naval capacity. Few scholars pay attention to the fact that Russia fears the Chinese might, which Donald Trump understood very well. In a deft strategy of a pragmatic entrepreneur, he bet on the weakest of opponents and, like Kissinger in his latest book (*World Power* 2014), identified Russia in that position. But reconciling domestic and foreign policy is not an easy task... China is aggressively projecting into the Arctic (it already has several economic concessions even in Greenland) and the demographic void of resource-rich Siberia is a source of concern in Moscow. Of the 470 airports that existed in the Russian Far East in 1991, only a sixth still function and thousands of villages have been abandoned in Siberia (Delanoë 2018). In number of submarines, Russia is being surpassed by China and in aircraft carriers by China and India. So, it is believable that much of the Russian naval reequipment effort is not aimed exclusively at the United States and NATO, but at finding a balance with China.

Russia is not just an energy power in the field of production, but its globalized capitalism (whatever the adjective is added) has oil, gas and mining companies operating worldwide in exploration in other countries. Russia is no longer just an exporter of energy and minerals, but a player among transnational companies. The projection of economic interests has historically always been accompanied by a corresponding increase in military power. The North Atlantic and Arctic, in terms of Defense, is the priority maritime space for the Russian Navy, especially with the growing possibility of using the Northern Route to connect the Atlantic to the Pacific, using only its securitized territorial waters. Although NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in December 2017 expressed concern about the growing Russian

naval presence in the North Atlantic<sup>7</sup> (Paillard 2018).

However, according to Admiral Antônio Silva Ribeiro, Chief of Staff of the Portuguese Armed Forces, Russia does not have the economic resources and military capacity to threaten the West, which would be more the case for China<sup>8</sup>. In official documents on naval power, the South Atlantic is not even mentioned as a specific operating zone. There is a brief passage about economic and “scientific” interests in Antarctica, but in the item which refers to the Indian Ocean, a region where the Russian navy has a certain presence, due to cooperation with India and interests in the Middle East and East Africa.

In the specific case of Africa, undoubtedly the Russian economic presence is growing, as a way to circumvent the international sanctions that the country has suffered since 2014 as a result of the annexation of Crimea. The *Russafrica* project (Fituni and Abramova 2010) had already been emphasizing the return to African markets, with the sale of weapons (especially to countries that have Soviet equipment), machinery and chemical products, in exchange for tropical products, phosphate and construction contracts infrastructure, energy and mineral exploration. What is observed is the emphasis on the need to earn profits, as in addition to the trade embargo, there was a reduction in the price of oil, which affects the Russian economy. The country is also interested in industrial fishing, although its fishing fleet has been surpassed by the Chinese. As a matter of fact, there are several conflicts of interest between the two countries in the economic field in Africa. And although the Russian presence in Peace Missions (support) and training in the military area is a reality, the country is qualitatively below China. The main Russian strategic partner is Egypt, which is more focused on the Middle East than on the rest of the African continent.

The Russian Federation is particularly concerned about the US concept of Global Stryke and considers it important to maintain its deterrence capability through a second ballistic missile strike fired by its nuclear submarines, especially with the US withdrawal of missile limitation agreements signed in the Russian Federation. Gorbachev’s era (Evitss 2019). It is correct that the Gulf of Guinea (with 20 coastal states and 5 Mediterranean) is rapidly acquiring economic and strategic importance, in a framework disturbed by piracy, kidnapping, robbery at sea, drug trafficking, terrorism and illegal fishing and migration. This tends to foment the security agenda, involving the powers, including Russia. In 2006 NATO carried out the Steadfast

---

7 The previous month, an Inter-Arms Command was created to protect the North Atlantic Maritime Routes, replacing the SACLANT command, dissolved in 2003.

8 Interview conducted by the author at the Portuguese Ministry of Defense, Lisbon, 4/15/2019.

Jaguar maneuver in Cape Verde, to demonstrate the ability to move troops out of its area of operation, and the following year it mounted a flotilla that circumnavigated Africa (Smith-Windsor and Pavia 2014).

Interestingly, the Russian Federation Navy is also developing its amphibious landing capabilities and support ships (such as helicopter carriers) for bridgehead securitization. All of this is incipient, but it deserves attention in terms of strategic planning (See article by Antonov 2016). Elsewhere, the Russian navy remains strategically concentrated in its nearby waters, which includes the Mediterranean Sea. According to Jonathan Evitss (2019), it has limited capacity to operate in the Caribbean and South America as a way of “showing the flag”, but not of projecting power. Essentially, Russia remains a land power and its ability to project naval force worldwide is limited to nuclear submarines. However, even in relation to these, Russia lacks the economic resources to sustain a competition with the maritime powers and even with China, which appears as a competitor, albeit an occasional ally.

## Final Remarks

The domination of the oceans by the Western European powers during the formation of the World System, followed by that of the United States of America, kept large continental states, such as China and Russia, contained within the Eurasian mass. Despite the Soviet Union’s naval efforts, from the 1960s to the late 1980s, to be present in the World Ocean, the country maintained a predominantly terrestrial military doctrine, with difficulties in accessing open seas. When the Cold War ended and the USSR collapsed, with its territory dismembered, its status as a naval power was further downgraded, while China just launched its economic-technological development in an extroverted way.

The socioeconomic development of the most populated region on the planet (more than half of the human community inhabits the ellipse between Karachi and Tokyo), however, has altered the previous world balance, in a movement with ramifications for Africa, the Middle East and even Latin America. The relative economic and civilizational (absolute?) decline of the North Atlantic states, in turn, accelerated a perception of threat, with the growing integration of the immense Eurasian space, with China and Putin’s Russia emerging. Everything became even more complicated with the Chinese naval projection and the increase in Russian deterrence capacity.

Even though the Chinese objective is clearly to guarantee (its) free navigation in the seas and that Russia lacks a global naval capacity, the West

is challenged by the difficulty in penetrating Eurasian space and also by the growing naval presence of ancient earth powers. This is a completely new reality, in which short, medium and long-term factors are mixed, in a difficult plot to unravel. Not only are the continental land powers back in the third millennium, they are challenging the naval power established by the West five centuries ago. All of this is exaggerated, for containment purposes, but it is an exaggeration supported by developing trends.

## REFERENCES

- Antonov, Alexander. 2016. *The Russian Navy as a military instrument of Global Politics*. Moscow: Russian Council.
- Brisset, Jean-Vincent. 2018. "Puissance Maritime Chinoise: Aspects stratégiques et militaires". *Atlas Diplomatie*, n.46.
- China. 2019. *China's National Defense in the New Era*. Beijing, Julho 2019.
- CSIS. 2019. "How is China modernizing its navy?". *Center for Strategic and International Studies - China Power Project*, 2019. Acesso em: 20 out. 2019. Disponível em: <<https://chinapower.csis.org/china-naval-modernization/>>
- Delanoë, Igor. 2018. "Russie: l'Océan, un horizon lointane". In, *Diplomatie. Mers et Océans, géopolitique et Géostratégie*. Paris: Août-Septembre 2018.
- Dufour, Jean-François. 1999. *Géopolitique de la Chine*. Bruxelles: Editions Complexe.
- Dufourcq, Jean. 2011. "Poder marítimo no século XXI: desafios para uma força naval moderna". *Revista da Escola de Guerra Naval*, Rio de Janeiro, v.17, n.2.
- Dufourcq, Jean. 2017. *La Chine, au coeur de son environnement stratégique, maritime et terrestre*. Université Paris-Dauphine.
- Epstein, Israel. 1980. *From Opium War to Liberation*. Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co..
- Ewitss, Jonathan. 2019. *Russian naval modernization and strategy*. Monterey/ CA: Naval Postgraduate School.
- Fairhall, David. 1971. *Russian sea power*. Boston: Gambit.
- Fanell, James E. 2019. "China's Global Naval Strategy and Expanding Force Structure - Pathway to Hegemony". *Washington: Naval War College Review*, v.72, n.1.
- Fituni, Leonid, and Abramova, Irina. 2010. "Ressource potential of Africa and

- Russia's national interest in the XXI Century". Moscow: *Institute for African Studies*, Russian Academy of Sciences.
- Gorshkov, Sergei. 1983. *The sea power of the State*. Malabar/Florida: Robert E. Krieger.
- Kissinger, Henry. 2014. *World order*. New York: Penguin Press.
- Kondapalli, Srikanth. 2000. "China's Naval Strategy". *Strategic Analysis*, v.23, n.12, p.2037-2056.
- Lovett, Christopher. 2010. "The Soviet Cold War Navy" In Higham, Robin, and Kagan, Frederik (Ed). *The Military History of Soviet Union*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Russia. 2001. *Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation 2020*. Moscow, 2001.
- Mearcheimer, John J. 2019. "Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order". *International Security*, v. 43, n. 4, p.7-50.
- Monaghan, Andrew. 2017. *Power in modern Russia*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Nagar, Dawn, and Mutasa, Charles (Ed). 2018. *Africa and the world*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Nantulya, Paul. 2019. "Implications for Africa from China's One Belt One Road Strategy". *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*. Disponível em: <<https://africacenter.org/spotlight/implications-for-africa-china-one-belt-one-road-strategy/>>.
- Paillard, Christophe-Alexandre. 2018. "Realités et limites d'une Nouvelle Guerre Friode em Atlantique Nord" In, *Diplomatie. Mers et Océans, géopolitique et Géostrategie*. Paris: Août-Septembre 2018.
- Spence, Jonathan D. 1995. *Em Busca da China Moderna: Quatro séculos de história*. São Paulo: Companhia da Letras.
- Smith-Windsor, Brooke, and Pavia, Jose Francisco. 2014. "From the Gulf of Aden to the Gulf of Guinea: a new maritime mission to NATO?". Rome: NATO Defense College; *NATO Research Paper no 100*, January 2014.
- Tertrais, Hugues. 2018. "Menaces em Mer de Chine Meridionale". *Atlas Diplomatie*, n.46.
- Westad, Odd Arne. 2007. *The Global Cold War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**ABSTRACT**

The Russian Federation and China are large land States (the first and fourth, respectively), characterized by their configuration as land powers from a geopolitical perspective. Recently, through its development and extroversion of its economy, China has built a naval power with a world presence. Russia, on the other hand, which lost much of the naval and coastal power that the USSR had, is trying to rebuild its capacity for maritime defense and exploration of the new Arctic Route, but still with limited global projection. By analyzing the recent naval projection of these traditional land powers, the article seeks to discuss the extent to which traditional geopolitics is reaching its zenith and initiating its own overcoming.

**KEYWORDS**

China; Russia; Naval projection.

*Received on October 11, 2021*

*Approved on December 16, 2021*

*Translated by Gabriela Ruchel*