



Grupo de Investigación  
**Historia Militar**



## **CHINESE MARITIME DIPLOMACY. A CHALLENGE TO THE HEGEMONIC POWER?**

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*"Maritime diplomacy is the possibility of using national navies for political purposes established by a state's foreign policy without the intention of provoking an armed conflict."*

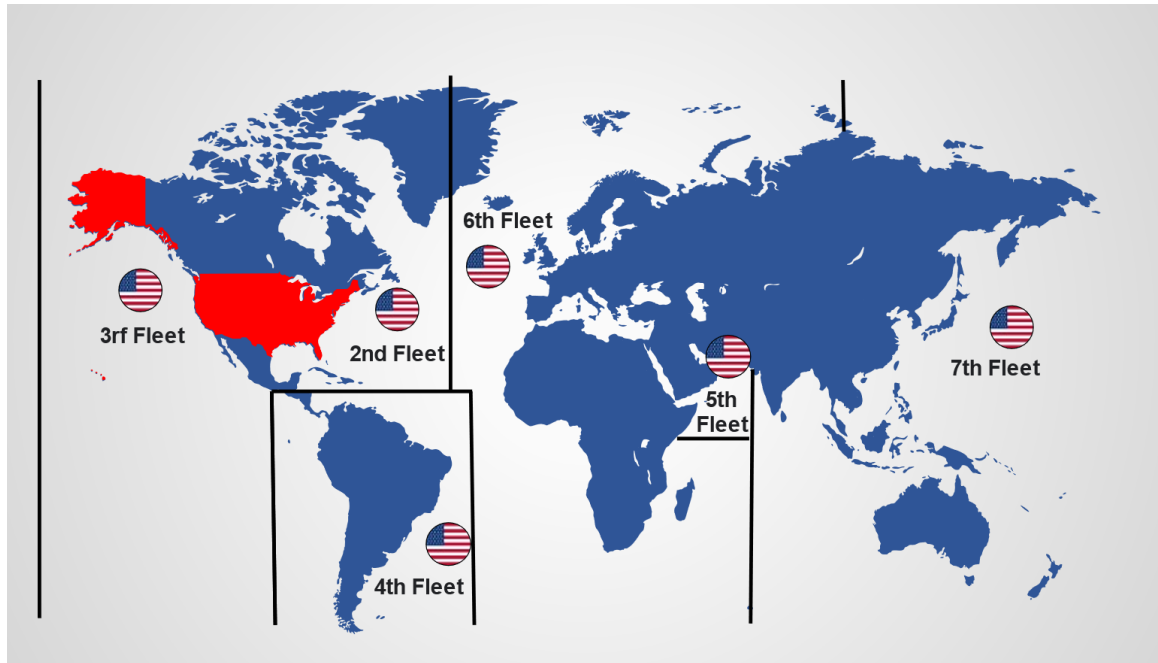
From a strategic dimension, Alfred Thayer Mahan's theory "Influence of Sea Power Upon History" published in 1890, forms a platform of analysis that has articulated the structure of geopolitical thought and the security strategies that have shaped the relations between the dominant powers and the world system since the end of the 19th century. This basic theoretical system constitutes one of the key interpretations of the dynamics of the international system and makes it possible to understand the transformations of the global balance of power.

In his influential work, Rear Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan expounds the theory of Naval Power to describe the close interrelationship between a country's military power over the oceans and the prosperity derived from seaborne trade; stating that "maritime power [...] includes not only the floating military power [...] but also the peaceful trade and navigation from which it arises and upon which a military fleet securely rests". His analysis on the need to generate the necessary naval capabilities to influence the characteristic conflicts of the balance of power and to project military power with bases/ports outside one's own territory to protect maritime trade, provides the structure that underlies the changes in the world hegemonic cycles of the last centuries. (Spain, Great Britain, USA).

For the U.S., its strategic precepts functioned, on the one hand, as a guiding dimension of foreign policy decision-making, laying the foundations of U.S. military doctrine and, on the other, had an impact on the circles of economic power interested in a structure of commercial activities centered on the North Atlantic Industrial Basin with global reach. In this sense, the annexation of Hawaii, the occupation of the Philippines in 1898 and the construction of the Panama Canal (claimed by Mahan and inaugurated in 1914), provided the US government with advanced bases to concentrate its naval fleet beyond its borders

and consolidate an advantageous commercial position to access markets in the Pacific.

In 1946, once U.S. hegemony was consolidated, President Harry Truman created the Unified Combatant Commands as a way to geographically structure U.S. military expansion in the context of the Cold War and provide support for the expansion of its strategic globalism with its maritime fleets distributed around the world.



Currently, the structural transformations generated by globalization, such as the crisis of the transnational financial system, market volatility, the advance of the neo-Keynesian paradigm with traits of nationalism or protectionist regionalism and competition in oceanic economic spaces, have given rise to a new global scenario of instability and hegemonic transition. In this sense, the above is perceived by geopolitical analysts as the cause of the shift of the center of gravity of world power from the North Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific, where the redefinition of relations between the US and the major Eurasian geostrategic actors, especially China, consolidates this trend.

In this context, the Chinese government is focused on expanding its economic, diplomatic, and military influence to defend its "core interests" in the Indo-Pacific, Eurasia, Middle East and Africa, creating a favorable environment in regions where US influence is increasingly weakened. Its war fleet is accelerating the transition of its tasks from defense in the near seas to expeditionary protection missions in the far seas (Two Oceans Strategy), outnumbering any rival fleet in

Asia, including aircraft carrier task forces and a new generation of nuclear submarines, possessing oceanic logistic support bases for increasing numbers of ships and expanding the geographic radius of its economic interests, mainly trade protection and energy transportation.

Within this framework, the "Maritime Silk Road" or "String of Pearls" represents a key diplomatic thrust of Chinese foreign policy and an ambitious turn westward, connecting a series of ports strategically located along the coastlines, sea lanes and choke points of the South China Sea, the Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea, the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea and the Mediterranean, where China proposed a wide range of maritime infrastructure cooperation projects focused on market integration, and trade value chain development, which gave the Asian giant the status of a "global power", providing more secure access to resources around the world and revalidating Rear Admiral Mahan's theory.



This situation has left the U.S.-China bilateral relationship framed as a "strategic competition", where mutual perceptions are hardening as China expands its policy in multiple domains. China's naval diplomacy intervenes in the zones of responsibility where the military power of several US Combatant Commands pivots, which gives geographic dimension to the concept of "strategic confrontation" and will require delicate political skill to achieve a minimum of coexistence amid divergent interests. On the other hand, new dynamics are at play, such as the ideological dimension, which generate greater tensions and, according to some analysts, are transforming the paradigm of "balance between

cooperation and competition" into that of "balancing competition and confrontation".

For its part, the Chinese government proclaims, "peaceful rise" as a political concept to underpin its growth and projection on a global scale, which, coupled with its "defensive military strategy", sends a clear message of rationality to the international arena. However, the US pursues the vision of China as an actor contributing to global geopolitical volatility. Could these estimates frustrate the development of a cooperative agenda and increase the growing skepticism about the possibilities and benefits of cooperation between the two powers?