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14. ABSTRACT China's development of ports along the 21 st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) has the potential to grow all aspects of Chinese national power, including diplomatic, informational, military, and economic (DIME) power, and the United States should pursue an asymmetric response based primarily upon non-military power. The MSR will increase Chinese economic power abroad, including sea power. It will grow Chinese overseas influence in the informational domain including through the collection of information and propagation of ideology. The MSR will enable the Chinese military to secure strategic sea lines of communication, sustain overseas deployments, and project combat power. China's diplomatic power will grow as a function of the other pillars of its national power. The United States should refrain from implementing a similar program. Instead, it should build and project informational and diplomatic power abroad, renew its maritime economic strength, and monitor the MSR in case it evolves to more directly threaten core American national security interests.					
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**China's DIME Power from the Maritime Silk Road
and an Asymmetric U.S. Response**

Introduction:

In 2017, the People's Republic of China (PRC) announced the *Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative* to build partnerships and infrastructure along three strategic sea lines of communication, together called the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR).¹ The MSR connects China via three maritime corridors to (1) the Indian Ocean, Africa, Middle East, and Europe, (2) Oceania and the South Pacific, and (3) eventually, via the Arctic to Europe. Ports are the key geographic feature that connect these maritime corridors to interior land domains in support of strategic goals.² Scholars have described how ports, when considered as a global network connecting the maritime domain to separate land domains, support a nation's strategic goals to dominate economically and geopolitically.³ China has invested massively in ports along the MSR (Table 1 and Figure 1). Chinese Paramount Leader Xi Jinping has personally identified himself with the success of the MSR.⁴ China has turned to the sea.

China's development of ports along the MSR has the potential to grow all aspects of Chinese national power, including diplomatic, informational, military, and economic (DIME) power, and the United States should pursue an asymmetric response based primarily upon non-military power. The MSR will increase Chinese economic power abroad, including sea power. It

¹ "Full Text: Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative," *Xinhua*, last modified on June 20, 2017, http://www.china.org.cn/world/2017-06/20/content_41063286.htm. The PRC's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) includes both the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) and the Silk Road Economic Belt.

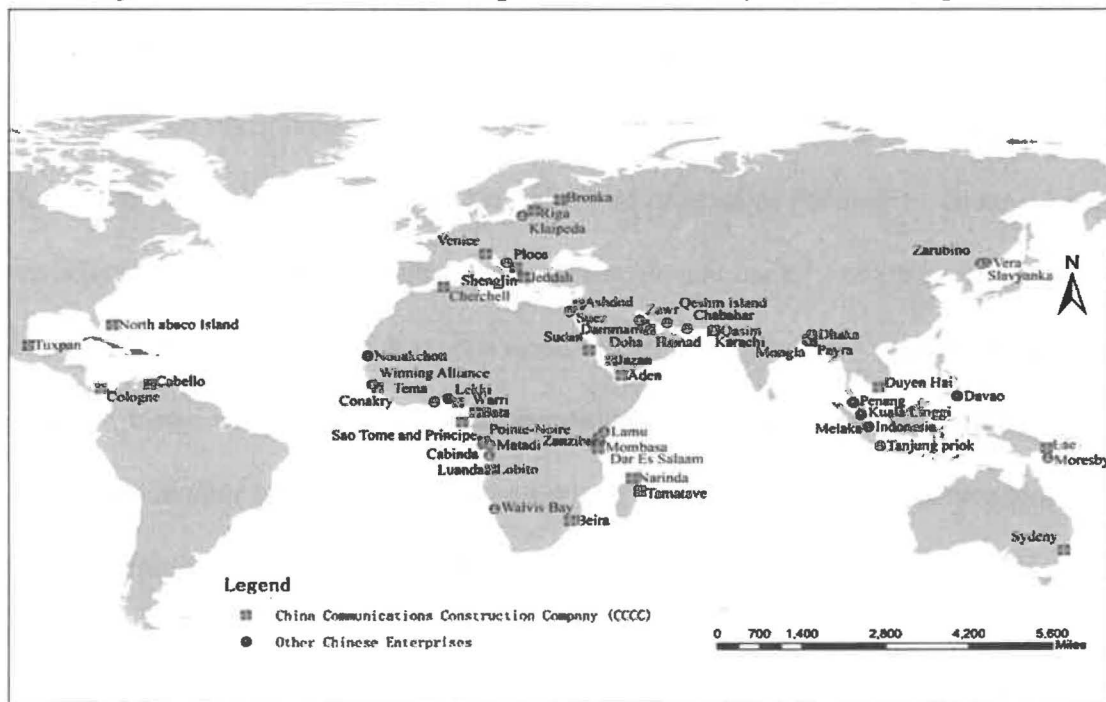
² Researchers have published many peer-reviewed studies on Chinese port investments along the MSR. To cite but two, see: Shantanu Roy-Chaudhury, "China, the Belt and Road Initiative, and the Hambantota Port Project," *St. Antony's International Review* 15, no. 1 (May 2019): 153–64. And: Mohid Iftikhar and Jing Vivian Zhan, "The Geopolitics of China's Overseas Port Investments: A Comparative Analysis of Greece and Pakistan," *Geopolitics* 27, no. 3 (October 2022): 826–51.

³ Hassan Noorali, Colin Flint, and Seyyed Abbas Ahmadi, "Port Power: Towards a New Geopolitical World Order," *Journal of Transport Geography* 105 (December 2022): 2.

⁴ Nadège Rolland, "Beijing's Response to the Belt and Road Initiative's 'Pushback': A Story of Assessment and Adaptation," *Asian Affairs* 50, no. 2 (May 2019): 217. For an in-depth study of China's current maritime transformation in the context of both world and Chinese maritime history, see: Andrew S. Erickson, Lyle Goldstein, and Carnes Lord, *China Goes to Sea: Maritime Transformation in Comparative Historical Perspective*, (Annapolis, Md: Naval Institute Press, 2009).

will grow Chinese overseas influence in the informational domain including through the collection of information and propagation of ideology. The MSR will enable the Chinese military to secure strategic sea lines of communication, sustain overseas deployments, and project combat power. China's diplomatic power will grow as a function of the other pillars of its national power. The United States should refrain from implementing a similar program. Instead, it should build and project informational and diplomatic power abroad, renew its maritime economic strength, and monitor the MSR in case it evolves to more directly threaten core American national security interests.

Figure 1. Locations of overseas ports constructed by Chinese enterprises.⁵



⁵ Reproduced from: Zhigao Liu, Seth Schindler, and Weidong Liu, “Demystifying Chinese Overseas Investment in Infrastructure: Port Development, the Belt and Road Initiative and Regional Development,” *Journal of Transport Geography* 87 (July 2020): 2.

Table 1. The expansion of China's involvement in overseas ports.⁶

Year	Ports constructed by Chinese enterprises	Ports owned/operated Chinese enterprises	Total number
2002	0	1	1
2003	0	1	1
2004	0	1	1
2005	0	1	1
2006	0	1	1
2007	1	0	1
2008	2	4	6
2009	1	0	1
2010	3	1	4
2011	2	0	2
2012	4	2	6
2013	3	12	15
2014	11	0	11
2015	11	4	15
2016	14	5	19
2017	7	14	21
2018	0	6	6
2019	1	0	1
N.A	2	1	3
Total	62	54	116

Economic Power: Growth, Interests, and Mitigation

The MSR will strengthen Chinese sea power. According to the naval historian Alfred Thayer Mahan, sea power is based on three links in a chain: (1) shipping, (2) commerce, and (3) colonies or markets.⁷ China is projected to be the largest commercial shipbuilder in the world in all major categories by 2030.⁸ Shanghai already has more shipbuilding capacity than the entire United States combined.⁹ China has the world's second largest economy and the largest and most efficient domestic maritime ports and internal transportation networks in the world.¹⁰ As it builds and runs more ports along the MSR, China's economy supports technical jobs in the maritime sector on a global scale, as well as land-domain jobs where ports meet interior transportation and

⁶ Reproduced from: Liu, Schindler, and Liu, "Demystifying Chinese Overseas Investment in Infrastructure: Port Development, the Belt and Road Initiative and Regional Development," 3.

⁷ Alfred T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783* (New York: Dover Publications, 1987): 71.

⁸ "Global Marine Trends 2030," Lloyd's Register, QinetiQ and University of Strathclyde, published in 2013 and accessed online on 15 April 2023 at <https://www.lr.org/en/insights/global-marine-trends-2030/>. The four major categories of shipbuilding in this report are bulk carrier, tanker, liquid natural gas, and containerships.

⁹ Daniel Caldwell, Joseph Freda, and Lyle J. Goldstein, *China Maritime Report No. 5: China's Dreadnought? The PLA Navy's Type 055 Cruiser and Its Implications for the Future Maritime Security Environment* (China Maritime Studies Institute, U.S Naval War College, 2020): 24.

¹⁰ Toshi Yoshihara and James R. Holmes, *Red Star over the Pacific: China's Rise and the Challenge to U.S. Maritime Strategy* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018): 49-50.

services. China can sustain these jobs with lower cost labor than the United States. The development and control of ports along the MSR will provide China with more efficient external markets and overseas support points to complete the Chinese sea power chain. According to one study, China is already the world's strongest commercial sea power.¹¹ China is building global sea power and a commercial maritime empire.

Looking at the Middle East and East Africa regions of one corridor of the MSR, one can see the potential for increases in Chinese foreign trade, including the exploitation and import of natural resources. China has significant strategic trade with the Arabian Gulf and ambitions to expand trade with Africa. In 2018, China imported 43.7% of its oil from the Arabian Gulf Region.¹² China's cumulative historical investment in African ports amounted to USD 25.549 billion covering 24 seaports in 20 African countries.¹³ China has helped develop internal transportation networks in these countries, such as the railway connecting Ethiopia to the Port of Djibouti, as well as the Mombasa-Nairobi railway. Efficient Chinese-run foreign ports and distribution networks will bring these foreign markets "closer" to China in terms of shorter time needed to complete shipping and delivery. This is a win-win according to one Chinese author, who notes that overseas port investment is "highly compatible with partners' national

¹¹ Kevin X. Li, Kun-Chin Lin, Mengjie Jin, Kum Fai Yuen, Zhongzhen Yang, and Yi Xiao, "Impact of the Belt and Road Initiative on Commercial Maritime Power," *Transportation Research Part A: Policy and Practice* 135 (May 2020): 165. As a cautionary note, this study concludes that Russia is the world's second strongest commercial sea power, a dubious conclusion that brings into question its analytic model. However, China's shipbuilding industry, efficient ports, and volume of maritime commerce make it a powerhouse despite geographic chokepoints along its coast, as described by Yoshihara and Holmes in *Red Star over the Pacific*.

¹² Zhiqiang Zou, "China's Participation in Port Construction in the Western Indian Ocean Region: Dynamics and Challenges," *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 15, no. 4 (December 2021): 496.

¹³ Zhongzhen Yanga, Yunzhu Heb, Hao Zhua, and Theo Notteboom, "China's Investment in African Ports: Spatial Distribution, Entry Modes and Investor Profile," *Research in Transportation Business & Management* 37 (December 2020): 1.

development strategies, including the UAE's 'Vision 2030,' Djibouti's 'Vision 2035,' and Kenya's 'Vision 2030.'"¹⁴ These economic links will tie countries closer to China.

Through development of the MSR, China hopes to disperse the risks of economic disruption across regions, allowing it to hedge against threats of economic coercion, instability, and risks of war.¹⁵ China intends to diversify its maritime supply chains across the Middle East, Africa, and the Indian Ocean Region. If the United States decouples certain strategic trade from China in the future and pressures allies to do the same, the MSR may enable China to switch to other trading partners to mitigate impacts to its economic stability. Moreover, as China's economy develops and produces higher value-added products and services, it will import more low value-added products from developing countries along the MSR. China may choose to selectively invest in countries along the MSR to solidify other viable trading relationships for economic stability. The ports along the MSR can make this trade efficient and resilient and reduce China's liability to economic coercion from the United States and Europe.

Information Power: Collect, Connect, and Influence

China's control of overseas ports will give it important access to information traveling in and out of nations (Figure 2). China is becoming an expert in the development and operation of smart cities and ports that leverage big data, digital connectivity, and efficient and sustainable industrial practices.¹⁶ The PRC has significant leverage over its State-Owned Enterprises and

¹⁴ Zou, "China's Participation in Port Construction in the Western Indian Ocean Region: Dynamics and Challenges," 496.

¹⁵ Pei-Shan Kao, "The Political Economy of China's Strategic Layout in Europe: A Case Study of the Belt and Road Initiative," *The Chinese Economy* 55, no. 4 (September 2022): 307.

¹⁶ Jihong Chen, Tiancun Huang, Xiaoke Xie, Paul Tae-Woo Lee, and Chengying Hua, "Constructing Governance Framework of a Green and Smart Port," *Journal of Marine Science and Engineering* 7, no. 4 (April 2019): 83.

corporations that build and run overseas ports, and it likely has access to all the information that these ports collect. This could include shipping and container throughput, personnel travel, financial data, and other strategic information. The PRC will likely use its ports for intelligence collection via human sources and the establishment of signals intelligence collection posts.¹⁷ For example, Beijing stated in 2018 that the contingent deployed to its first overseas naval base in Djibouti included “one intelligence electronic communication squadron.”¹⁸ Combine this with the fact that China is a world leader in the deployment of commercial telecommunications networks, and one must conclude that the MSR will assist the PRC to enhance what the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency describes as its “vast signals intelligence and computer network operations infrastructure.”¹⁹ Finally, ports are often near the landing sites of undersea cables. China may leverage its access in ports to tamper with existing cables to collect the information transiting between continents. Such information dominance can give China an advantage in statecraft and decision making on all levels of national power.

As international pressure continues to grow for action to mitigate climate change, the MSR will posture China to build “green power” by supplying clean and sustainable ports and energy solutions to developing nations. China is developing sustainable domestic ports, and it can export the same models of port management to the MSR abroad.²⁰ As one Chinese

¹⁷ “China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win,” U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, 99, last modified in 2019, accessed online at: https://www.dia.mil/Portals/110/Images/News/Military_Powers_Publications/China_Military_Power_FINAL_SMB_20190103.pdf.

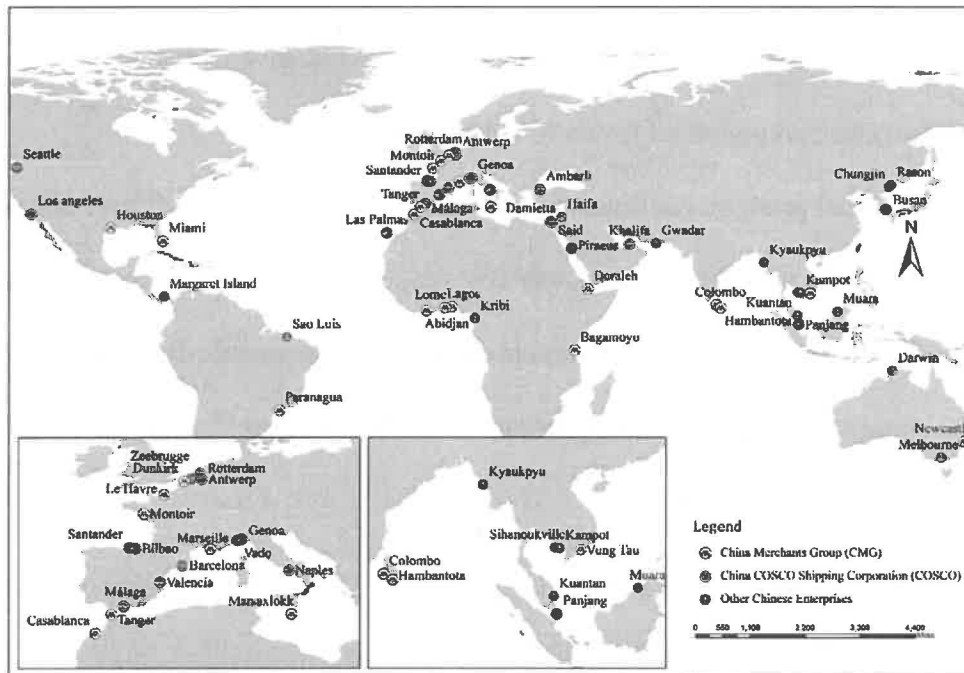
¹⁸ Jean-Pierre Cabestan, “China’s Military Base in Djibouti: A Microcosm of China’s Growing Competition with the United States and New Bipolarity,” *The Journal of Contemporary China* 29, no. 125 (2020): 739.

¹⁹ Daria Impiombato, “Chinese Telecommunications Giants and Africa’s Emerging Digital Infrastructure,” in *(In)roads and Outposts: Critical Infrastructure in China’s Africa Strategy*, ed. by Nadège Rolland, (The National Bureau of Asian Research, May 2022): 61-63, accessed online at: <https://www.nbr.org/publication/inroads-and-outposts-critical-infrastructure-in-chinas-africa-strategy/>.

²⁰ Daozhi Zhao, Tianyi Wang, and Hongshuai Han, “Approach towards Sustainable and Smart Coal Port Development: The Case of Huanghua Port in China,” *Sustainability* 12, no. 9 (May 2020): 1-23.

researcher writes, the “Development of a green and smart port represents an inevitable trend for future ports. Mutually integrated development of the two contributes to enhancing port competitiveness as well as to accommodating issues of sustainability in tandem with artificial intelligence, and big data environment (sic).”²¹ Sustainable smart ports may be integrated into smart cities to collect data for the purpose of efficiently mitigating environmental degradation while simultaneously legitimizing the centralized collection of information, which again can be employed for intelligence collection purposes. China may enter agreements with authoritarian regimes along the MSR to assist in population control, which is ominous given China’s human rights record.

Figure 2. Locations of some overseas ports owned and operated by Chinese enterprises.²²



²¹ Jihong Chen, Tiancun Huang, Xiaoke Xie, Paul Tae-Woo Lee, and Chengying Hua, “Constructing Governance Framework of a Green and Smart Port,” *Journal of Marine Science and Engineering* 7, no. 4 (March 2019): 14.

²² Liu, Schindler, and Liu, “Demystifying Chinese Overseas Investment in Infrastructure: Port Development, the Belt and Road Initiative and Regional Development,” 3.

Green power will supply transnational ideological solidarity and legitimacy between China and its prospective partners. China is a global leader in the cutting-edge technology industries of solar power and battery storage, both of which will be in high demand to power not only the ports, but the economies along the MSR. There is a fundamental ideological appeal common to China and to countries in Africa and the Middle East to implement sustainable development. Green power may also be an economic boon to the developing world by enabling it to leapfrog past carbon-based power generation, storage, and transmission technologies. Therefore, China is industrially positioned to benefit from an ideological movement through the provision of clean technology to the developing world, which will give it legitimizing green power.

Finally, Chinese overseas ports along the MSR can become hubs for the propagation of Chinese ideology, language, culture, news, and propaganda. The biggest container ports in the world are in urban areas, in or near the biggest cities in the world, giving them unique access to consumers, intellectuals, finance networks, and cultural centers. The rise of economically powerful national cities is directly affiliated with the rise of hegemony.²³ Therefore, Chinese-run and operated ports along the MSR may give China direct access into powerful national cities around the globe, increasing Chinese influence. From a realist perspective, this would occur at the cost of the influence of other nations which have traditionally held sway in such regions.

Military Power: Secure, Sustain, and Project

The PRC's construction and operation of ports along the MSR will enable it to better protect strategic sea lines of communication to its economic and political interests abroad. China

²³ Hassan Noorali, Colin Flint, and Seyyed Abbas Ahmadi, "Port Power: Towards a New Geopolitical World Order," *Journal of Transport Geography* 105 (December 2022): 5.

considers that protecting the flow of raw materials to sustain its economy is of critical importance.²⁴ To that end, China has continuously deployed a Naval Escort Task Force (NETF) to the Gulf of Aden since 2008 to support counterpiracy operations and to escort commercial shipping.²⁵ The semi-official People's Liberation Army (PLA) journal *Science of Military Strategy* enjoins the PLA Navy (PLAN) to deploy "large destroyers" to the "far seas," and more recently other Chinese sources have explicitly connected the PLAN's new Type 055 destroyer," referred to as "China's dreadnought," to the MSR.²⁶ As China's economic and political interests grow overseas, as the PLAN expands, and as China invests in the MSR, one can predict that overseas deployments of PLAN NETFs will multiply to perhaps two or three operating simultaneously in different locations along the MSR within a decade.

A network of Chinese-owned and operated dual use ports will enable overseas naval husbanding, replenishment, and support for PLAN deployments abroad, which is currently a critical gap. In view of current political factors and near-term mission requirements, China is likely to mainly utilize dual use port facilities in the short-term to support naval deployments.²⁷ Many of China's MSR port investments are capable of use for commercial and military purposes. This does not prevent China from developing overseas military bases as well: as noted,

²⁴ Daniel Caldwell, Joseph Freda, and Lyle J. Goldstein, "China Maritime Report No. 5: China's Dreadnought? The PLA Navy's Type 055 Cruiser and Its Implications for the Future Maritime Security Environment," (China Maritime Studies Institute at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons, 2020): 20. Consulted online at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1004&context=cmsi-maritime-reports>.

²⁵ Andrew S. Erickson and Austin M. Strange, "Chinese Cooperation to Protect Sea-Lane Security Antipiracy Operations in the Gulf of Aden," in *Beyond the Wall: Chinese Far Seas Operation, CMSI Red Books, Study 13*, ed. Peter A. Dutton and Ryan D. Martinson, (Newport: U.S Naval War College, 2015), 33-34.

²⁶ Caldwell, Freda, and Goldstein, "China Maritime Report No. 5: China's Dreadnought? The PLA Navy's Type 055 Cruiser and Its Implications for the Future Maritime Security Environment," 20.

²⁷ Christopher D. Yung, "Chinese Overseas Basing Requirements for the Twenty-First Century," in *Beyond the Wall: Chinese Far Seas Operation, CMSI Red Books, Study 13*, 54-58. For another analysis of the type of military basing or dual use support model that China is likely to employ in the short term, see also: Christopher D. Yung et al., *"Not an Idea We Have to Shun": Chinese Overseas Basing Requirements in the 21st Century*, (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2014).

China commissioned its first overseas naval base in the Port of Djibouti in July of 2017, a huge step in sustaining naval deployments.²⁸ A challenge for China will be to square a dual use port's commercial status with military requirements, such as ammunition storage, security, and ready accessibility. That said, Chinese academics are studying port governance structures.²⁹ The PRC can probably overcome these challenges, which will provide it with increased naval support infrastructure abroad.

The PLAN may utilize Chinese dual use ports along the MSR as support points for military power projection. Chinese authors writing in *Science of Military Strategy* indicated that Chinese military power could protect Chinese overseas interests in addition to contributing to counterpiracy and maritime security. A crisis in Yemen in 2015 exasperated Xi Jinping over China's inability to protect its interests, and he described them as essentially "undefended."³⁰ The next year, a Chinese nuclear-powered attack submarine conducted the first ever port call in South Asia by a PLAN nuclear submarine, to Karachi, Pakistan. This was followed in 2017 by PLAN submarine port calls in Malaysia and Pakistan.³¹ China's growing "far seas" naval deployments and blistering pace of naval ship construction unmatched since the height of the Cold War portends a sinister eventual scenario.³² The PLAN may soon be capable of deploying and husbanding NETFs – including large destroyers and submarines – to dual use ports in not

²⁸ Zou, "China's Participation in Port Construction in the Western Indian Ocean Region: Dynamics and Challenges," 498-502.

²⁹ Qiang Zhang et al., "Who Governs and What Is Governed in Port Governance: A Review Study," *Transport Policy* 64 (May 2018): 51–60.

³⁰ Ryan Martinson, "China's Oceanic Aspirations: New Insights from the Experts," *Orbis* 66, no. 2 (April 2022): 266.

³¹ "China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win," U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, 51, last modified in 2019, accessed online at: https://www.dia.mil/Portals/110/Images/News/Military_Powers_Publications/China_Military_Power_FINAL_5MB_20190103.pdf.

³² Martinson, "China's Oceanic Aspirations: New Insights from the Experts," 266.

only the Indian Ocean, but also the South Atlantic or South Pacific to distract the United States from Taiwan or other potential flashpoints in the Western Pacific.

The deployment of a PLAN NETF or submarine to the South Atlantic would expose the United States to a maritime threat for which the U.S. Navy has not historically been postured. Traditionally, Russian Federation Navy ships and submarines approached from the Arctic, or “High North,” and so the U.S. Navy and North Atlantic Treaty Organization are postured to face threats from that direction. Yet the PLAN deployed ships to the South Atlantic every year from 2014 until 2019, the year of the start of the Covid-19 Pandemic.³³ In late 2021, news reports emerged of a Chinese request to Equatorial Guinea for a naval base.³⁴ In sum, PLAN NETFs are routinely deploying west along the MSR to the South Atlantic, PLAN submarines are deploying farther than ever along the same route, and it will be unsurprising if China has a naval base in the Gulf of Guinea within a decade. Similarly, the deployment of a PLAN NETF to the South Pacific would create a new threat to the West Coast of the United States and threaten American sea lines of communication to Australia and New Zealand.

The presence of the PLA in overseas dual use ports will position it to increase military diplomacy, including terrestrial and maritime security cooperation with host nations. The presence of large PLAN destroyers and nuclear submarines may serve as symbols to coerce leaders who see them. Additionally, all countries but especially developing countries along the MSR have a limited capacity to absorb foreign security cooperation events, which could lead to

³³ Ryan D. Martinson, “China as an Atlantic Naval Power,” *The RUSI Journal* 164, no. 7 (December 2019): 31.

³⁴ Michael M. Phillips, “China Seeks First Military Base on Africa’s Atlantic Coast, U.S. Intelligence Finds,” *The Wall Street Journal*, updated Dec. 5, 2021, https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-seeks-first-military-base-on-africas-atlantic-coast-u-s-intelligence-finds-11638726327?mod=Searchresults_pos5&page=1.

the crowding out of historical partners.³⁵ More broadly, from an international relations realist theory perspective of zero-sum geopolitical power, Chinese military influence may displace America and her allies from cooperative relationships, and not only in the military realm.

Diplomatic Power: Leverage and a New Order

The ways in which China's diplomatic power will increase through its network of MSR ports are straightforward. China's increased economic, informational, and military power along the MSR will provide carrots and sticks that it can employ to exert diplomatic leverage. For example, China's ability to broker a diplomatic peace agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia in 2023 can be seen as a natural byproduct of its increased regional economic leverage, not to mention of its consistent deployment of a PLAN NETF to the Gulf of Aden.³⁶ This leverage has come via China's increased trade and investment in both countries, including in ports and infrastructure. The United States is the loser in this scenario as seen from a realist perspective of losing geopolitical influence in the region in a zero-sum game. The implications in the region are that the United States may have a harder time obtaining regional support for diplomatic initiatives when China is not supportive of them. Additionally, one can see how this scenario may be replicated along other corridors of the MSR, particularly along the coasts of Africa and in the South Pacific. American diplomatic influence may weaken as Chinese influence increases.

If China pulls more states into its orbit via the MSR, it may construct its own block of states that do not share the principles of the United States-led liberal world order. China invests

³⁵ Kardon, Isaac B., and Wendy Leutert. "Pier Competitor: China's Power Position in Global Ports," *International Security* 46, no. 4 (2022): 9–47.

³⁶ Maria Fantappie and Vali Nasr, "A New Order in the Middle East? Iran and Saudi Arabia's Rapprochement Could Transform the Region," *Foreign Affairs*, last modified on March 22, 2023, [https://www.foreignaffairs.com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/china/iran-saudi-arabia-middle-east-relations](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/usnwc.idm.oclc.org/china/iran-saudi-arabia-middle-east-relations).

and trades with many countries along the MSR where the leadership does not share or does not hold strong opinion about the liberal order values of human rights, free trade, and liberty. These states – such as Iran, North Korea, Equatorial Guinea, and others – may give China far more leeway to bend and remake the international rules-based order to its preferences. The larger this network becomes, the harder it will be for the United States and its allies to exert pressure on China to maintain the current world order. There is a risk that China will create and lead a network of sympathetic regimes, as the United States seeks to diversify its economic supply chains and contain China's rise. This could have long term strategic impacts in a realignment of world power into opposing societies or blocks in a multi-polar world order. While these regimes may not strike fear on an individual level, they may provide a boost to China's diplomatic legitimacy and offer China dual use ports for the PLAN or territory for military basing. Ultimately these relationships could become the basis for alliances as China grows more comfortable with overseas influence.

An Asymmetric Response, the American Way

The United States should pursue an asymmetric response, meaning that it should not try to match China's MSR with a similar project of its own, as that would risk strategic overextension, not be in American interests, and could provoke counterproductive confrontation. After the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States needs to outsmart its competitors overseas rather than outspend them. The United States does not have an obvious interest to massively invest in distant ports and infrastructure along the MSR. Additionally, trying to match the PRC with investments along the MSR in a tit-for-tat manner would not go unnoticed, and

could prove a distraction from more important issues in bilateral diplomacy between China and the United States, such as Taiwan, the South China Seas, and bilateral economic ties.

The United States should frame its strategic response to the MSR in the larger context of China's rise and American interests. The MSR is in part a byproduct of China's growing overseas interests and its rational desire to protect them, including for the stability of its economy and political system. It is also rational to view the MSR as part of a deliberate PRC strategy to increase its global influence and challenge American hegemony. In fact, a wide variety of Chinese national, provincial, and commercial interests are likely driving the development of the MSR, demonstrating the complexity of understanding the motivations and forces behind it and of choosing appropriate policy responses.³⁷ Yet fear of China's MSR should not drive the United States into a "Thucydides Trap." What is needed, as Graham Allison has noted, is "a long pause for reflection" on the larger issue of China's growing power.³⁸ The projected growth of Chinese power in the Pacific and around the globe is naturally a concern to American national security, but strong Chinese sea power is not unprecedented in history.³⁹ The United States should identify its greatest strategic concerns vis-à-vis the MSR, and focus a strategy around them, perhaps based around the potential future extension of the MSR into the Western Hemisphere.

Given the predominantly non-military character of the MSR, the United States should leverage informational and diplomatic tools of power abroad to understand and counter Chinese influence along its maritime corridors. The U.S. Intelligence Community should monitor China's

³⁷ Liu, Schindler, and Liu, "Demystifying Chinese Overseas Investment in Infrastructure: Port Development, the Belt and Road Initiative and Regional Development," 1.

³⁸ Graham Allison, "The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?" *The Atlantic*, 24 September 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/united-states-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756/>.

³⁹ Yoshihara and Holmes, *Red Star over the Pacific: China's Rise and the Challenge to U.S. Maritime Strategy*, 75-77.

investments in ports along the MSR to understand the resulting impact on China's DIME power and the potential threat to American interests. In order to posture the United States Navy appropriately, the Department of Defense needs to know where the PLAN will utilize ports for naval resupply and where it will build future overseas naval bases. American diplomats need accurate information about the MSR for their negotiations with foreign partners, to underline the risks and potential harm to relations with the United States of accepting basing and other strategic agreements with the PRC. China's investments along the MSR will likely yield mixed results and could in many cases wind up being a gigantic waste of resources for the PRC, with little strategic gain. This will likely play out slowly in coming years, but policy makers need to accurate information and assessments on how the MSR evolves.

The MSR is primarily aimed away from the Western Hemisphere, which poses a greater threat to states in Eurasia than to the United States Homeland, which offers an opportunity for diplomacy. The overall Belt and Road Initiative has the potential to draw China into costly land power conflicts and quagmires in Eurasia, notably with India, the European Union, or perhaps eventually Russia, which could undermine China's maritime transformation. The United States should message the accumulating facts of China's growing overseas influence via informational and diplomatic tools of power. Messaging should highlight China's growing geopolitical influence, as well as the fact that from a realist perspective, American allies and partners stand to lose influence. This will help in creating a diplomatic coalition to push back against the PRC if it leverages its growing national and particularly military power along the MSR to threaten American national security. The United States should simultaneously maintain its "do no harm" strategy of steadily engaging in partnerships across all elements of DIME power with selected, reliable partners that share American values.

Finally, the United States can maintain its global hegemony by investing in its sea power and green economy. As previously noted, China possesses the most efficient ports and internal waterways in the world. There is no reason why the United States should not be able to claim this title. In accordance with the Department of Transportation's *Goals and Objectives for a Stronger Maritime Nation: A Report to Congress*, the United States should support incentives for investment in American maritime infrastructure, commercial sealift capacity, and the maritime workforce.⁴⁰ This will foster American commercial sea power and economic growth while supporting American naval strength. The United States should also lead the world in the development and manufacture of carbon-neutral power generation, storage, and transmission technologies to grow American green power and deny China the economic and informational benefits of a monopoly in this space. Renewed American economic strength in the homeland will ultimately project greater economic and commercial strength abroad and generate a better return than a project of massive investment in overseas ports.

Conclusion

PRC Paramount Leader Xi Jinping reportedly remarked “there’s a common saying, ‘if you want to get rich, first build a road,’ but in coastal areas, if you want to get rich, you also need to build a port.”⁴¹ The MSR is an essential element of China’s grand strategy, and China’s development of ports along the MSR will increase all elements of Chinese diplomatic, informational, military, and economic power. China places a growing priority on its need for a secure supply of overseas natural resources and to protect its expanding overseas economic

⁴⁰ United States Department of Transportation, *Goals and Objectives for a Stronger Maritime Nation: A Report to Congress* (Washington, D.C., Feb 2020), 2.

⁴¹ Isaac Kardon, “China’s Ports in Africa,” in *(In)roads and Outposts: Critical Infrastructure in China’s Africa Strategy*, ed. by Nadège Rolland, (The National Bureau of Asian Research, May 2022): 17.

interests, most of which run through ports. The MSR can strengthen Chinese power abroad via information collection and propagation, and via the sharing of green power which may create solidarity with the developing world. China's growing naval fleet is increasingly capable of deploying to the "far seas" and new ports along the MSR will increase PLAN NETF and submarine sustainment and power projection capabilities. China will gain increased global diplomatic leverage from the MSR to rival the United States-led world order. Yet China's growing power from the MSR is a byproduct of its growing domestic national power. The United States should reflect deeply on the likely challenges that the MSR poses to American global hegemony in order to implement constructive policy. The United States should monitor the development of the MSR, respond asymmetrically, and build a coalition to protect shared values and interests.