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Revisiting Great Power Maritime Strategy in Critical Choke Points

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Introduction

Maritime strategies of the great powers on critical choke points are driven by area denial, protecting the zone of influence, and power projection. As the fluid world order is being reshaped by the US-China rivalry, critical choke points are crucial in determining their access to key strategic areas and resources. So, great powers are pursuing strategies to adapt to the fluid world order by dominating key strategic locations. Meanwhile, the strategies of regional hegemons are driven by adaptation to emerging securitized frameworks while they pursue their interests. The core is to maintain the hegemonic status quo in respective areas. Therefore, choke points play a vital role in shaping great power maritime strategies, as they have immense geostrategic importance in securing the hegemonic status quo.

These passages control the vital supply chains of resources; any disruption causes global economic backlash and enhances the likelihood of conflict. These are the crucial junctures that determine accessibility to the other parts of the ocean and the landmasses.[2] That is why surveillance and control on the flow of goods remain essential to avoid unwanted issues. Accordingly, terrorist activities and piracy are causing security threats in the unprotected zones and disrupting the supply chains. So the littoral states proximate to these zones have an advantage in dealing with economic and security issues in these zones. However, the geostrategic and geo-economic importance of these zones is highly conducive to great power involvement because these are crucial for their

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[2] Harkavy, Robert E. 1982. *Great Power Competition for Overseas Bases: The Geopolitics of Access Diplomacy*. Pergamon Policy Studies on Security Affairs. Pergamon Press.

optimum interests in pursuing any strategies concerning area denial, zone protection, and power projection.

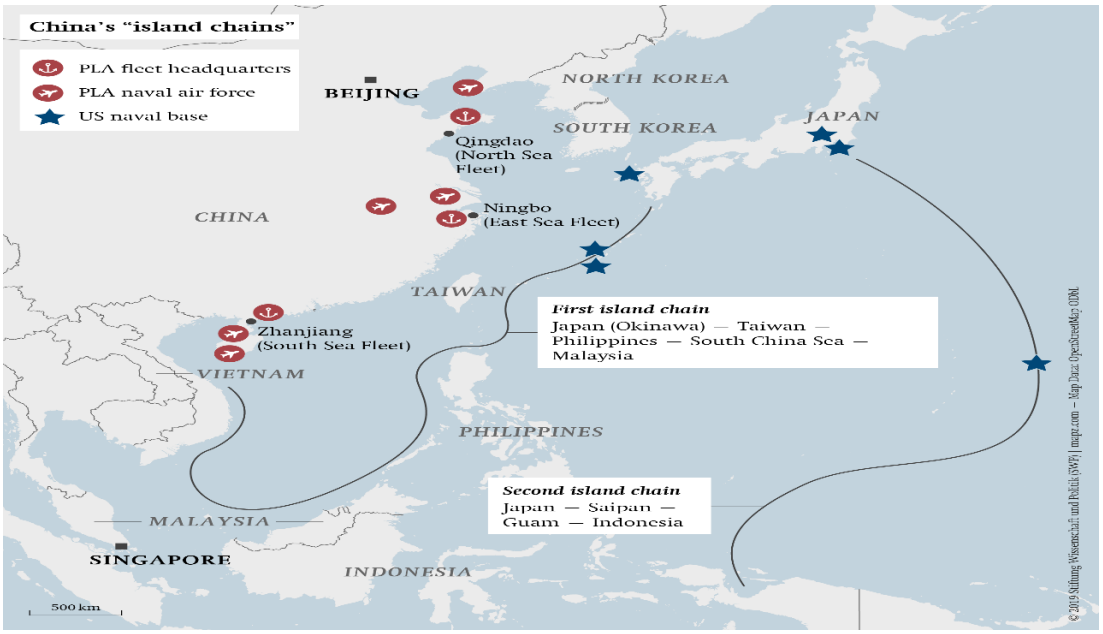

Figure 1: The US-China Maritime Rivalry. Source: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik

Amongst many, the Malacca Strait, the Strait of Gibraltar, the Panama Canal, the Suez Canal, and the Sunda Strait are the critical chokepoints that possess immense geo-strategic importance in shaping great power maritime strategies. The US's National Security Strategy 2025 emphasizes the country's concern about its power projection capability in the high seas, both in the Western Hemisphere and the Pacific.[3] Though the Pacific has been the key zone where the largest share of the US fleets operates, the Trump administration's emphasis on the western hemisphere raises concerns for the Atlantic Ocean region. So control in the high seas essentially depends on the control in critical choke points. China, on the other hand, is pursuing an A2/AD policy so that it can control the South China Sea and the entry and exit through the Malacca and Singapore straits, along with the Sunda[4]. Given the importance of the Taiwan issue and the Indian Ocean, access to

[3] Harding, Emily. 2025. *The National Security Strategy: The Good, the Not So Great, and the Alarm Bells*. December 5. https://www.csis.org/analysis/national-security-strategy-good-not-so-great-and-alarm-bells.

[4] Glosny, Michael A., Phillip C. Saunders, and Robert S. Ross. 2010. "Debating China's Naval Nationalism [with Reply]." *International Security* 35 (2): 161–75

the Red Sea and the Strait of Hormuz is cost-efficient and necessary for control of the major portion of global supply chains. That's why Indo-Pacific has become the zone of great power contention. Along with other portions of the Pacific, securing the Panama Canal from narcotics, illegal migration, and piracy has become an important aspect of securing the US's domination in its backyard, given the reality of the volatility in Latin America.[5] Regional hegemons in respecting areas are playing a crucial role through strategic hedging in that regard, and often are aligning with the securitized frameworks or pursuing a strategy of political denial and strategic area denial.

So, considering the geopolitical and geoeconomic implications of critical choke points, an exploration of the great power maritime strategy is necessary.

Conditions for A2/AD and Power Projection

Great power control on the critical choke points is driven by whether they pursue a strategy of area denial or power projection through sea control. The conditions for pursuing either of the strategies are highly dependent on their military capability, tactics, conventional dependence on weaponry, technological supremacy, short and long-term geo-economic and geo-political gains, and their strategic visions.

Area denial (A2/AD) strategy is fundamentally focused on controlling access to great powers' perceived maritime zones, where they possess their conventional maritime supremacy. With the intention of controlling the South China Sea, for example, China possesses an asymmetric capacity that is relatively low in terms of controlling the high seas. For that purpose, its conventional dependency on mines, drones, and small warships in sea control is highly effective in controlling the exit and entry in the South China Sea.[6] It often uses civilian boats out of its coastal zone for patrolling to avoid violating international law. Though China is enhancing its offensive naval capability, this functions as a deterrent. To a greater extent, China is more prone to extending its coastal zone artificially to claim territorial extension. That means the area denial strategy depends

[5] Emmerson, Charles, and Paul Stevens. n.d. *Maritime Choke Points and the Global Energy System*

[6] Horta, Loro. n.d. *China Turns to the Sea: Changes in the People's Liberation Army Navy Doctrine and Force Structure*.

on achieving full asymmetric naval capability at the same time, utilizing high sea power projection capacity as a deterrent.[7]

Controlling the high seas necessitates a high level of power projection capability. It necessitates controlling the high seas through a technologically advanced navy with a high level of offensive capability. The US has been dominating the high seas because of the symmetric capacity it possesses. This posture is more offensive than defensive A2/AD. Its clear vision is to ensure comfortable entry and exit against the area control strategy that is necessary for securing its trade and strategic objectives. Aircraft carriers, destroyers, amphibious ships, along with the bases established on the coasts of crucial locations, serve their greater strategic objectives.[8] That means, through controlling the high seas, the US strategy is to safeguard its dominance in key strategic locations.

The US Naval Strategy in Critical Choke Points

The evolution of the US naval strategy from sea control to power projection has been determined by its broader strategy in the Western Hemisphere and the Pacific. From the Mahanian doctrine to the reapproachment of the Trump administration, controlling the high seas and the littoral through power projection has been of great emphasis. The 2025 National Security Strategy emphasizes increased defense expenditure and reorientation of the fleets.[9] But operating from the high seas necessitates establishing bases in crucial geostrategic locations for successful littoral warfare and through making allies and burden sharing. The core of the US naval strategy is to operate from the bases, and if needed, amphibious ships and aircraft carriers are ready to checkmate.

By emphasizing the strategy of the command of the sea model, the US strategy is more prone to prioritize sea lines of communication concerning the critical geographic locations. The traditional naval warfare is integrated with the distributive approach, with tech superiority in maintaining

[7] Fishman, Edward. 2025. *Chokepoints: American Power in the Age of Economic Warfare*. Penguin Group.

[8] Cropsey, Seth, and Bryan McGrath. n.d. *Maritime Strategy in a New Era of Great Power Competition*.

[9] Harding, Emily. 2025. *The National Security Strategy: The Good, the Not So Great, and the Alarm Bells*. December 5. https://www.csis.org/analysis/national-security-strategy-good-not-so-great-and-alarm-bells.

global mobility that would also be effective in deterring the counterparts.[10] The 2025 NSS re-emphasises the projection capacity that shall enhance the naval mobility while deterring the adversaries in critical waters. The focus is on maintaining the number of aircraft carriers at least 12 and the warship expansion to at least 380. Another strategy is to disperse the fleet for a strategic aim to complicate adversary targeting.[11] This strategic success depends on the concentrated fire and the efficient use of networked sensors and long-range precision weapons.[12] The other is to destroy the threats to access by an offensive sea control strategy. This necessitates moving beyond missile interception capacity to destroying aircraft, ships, and submarines.

On the Strait of Hormuz, the US core military objective is to secure energy by deterring. This necessitates efficiency in counter-mine warfare and active initiatives against illegal boarding in the concerned zone.[13] Again, the strategy on the Red Sea is mainly to ensure freedom of navigation through defending against land-based drones and missiles. But in the South China Sea, the strategy is containment through counter-blocade that necessitates using stand-in forces and defense to secure forward defense.[14]

Furthermore, regional containment and undersea warfare are two crucial strategies through which the US controls the crucial waters. The US is doubling down on the first island chain to deter adversaries in the Luzon Strait and Batanes.[15] This is effective when the long-range strike systems function as they are supposed to. A similar strategy might not be applicable when the US Navy

[10] Paszak, Paweł. n.d. *The Malacca Strait, the South China Sea and the Sino-American Competition in the Indo-Pacific*.

[11] Alexander, Lewis M. 1992. "The Role of Choke Points in the Ocean Context." *Geojournal* 26 (4): 503–9. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02665750.

[12] Glosny, Michael A., Phillip C. Saunders, and Robert S. Ross. 2010. "Debating China's Naval Nationalism [with Reply]." *International Security* 35 (2): 161–75.

[13] Baruah, Darshana M. 2020. *Military Strategy*. India in the Indo-Pacific: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep24919.8.

[14] Yoshihara, Toshi. 2013. "The US Navy's Indo–Pacific Challenge." *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 9 (1): 90–103. https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2013.793914.

[15]Wang, Xue, Debin Du, and Yan Peng. n.d. *Assessing the Importance of the Marine Chokepoint: Evidence from Tracking the Global Marine Traffic*.

faces operational avoidance in the archipelagic sea lanes, as it is necessary to assert a transit passage.[16] But stand-in forces are effective in conducting sea denial within the weapon's engagement zone of the counterpart. Again, undersea warfare through mine countermeasures is concerned with clearing modern sea mines. Also Securing cable and undersea assets through grey zone activities in the critical choke points are prerequisites to protect intercontinental data flow from sabotage.[17]

How is Chinese A2/AD Effective?

The effectiveness of A2/AD depends on the overall defensive capacity of a country. Political denial is a weapon through which military hedging is applied. Chinese A2/AD is highly dependent on its overall posture in deterring the US fleet in the South China Sea. Concerning Taiwan, a shift toward warfare readiness and deterrence capability is foreseen, where the fundamental strategy is focused on neutralizing the West's geographical advantage.

The core of Chinese maritime strategy is to protect its mainland first, but through enhancing its power projection capacity. This necessitates preventing the counterpart navy from operating within the first and second island chains through A2/AD. At a time, securing alternative corridors in the risk of the Malacca blockade is necessary. The Chinese ambition to enhance its naval power projection capacity includes the naval standoffs in the Indian Ocean.

Securing the primary gateway to enter the US forces in the South China Sea is the Luzon Strait and the Taiwan Strait. To intercept large surface groups through carrier killers requires ensuring second-strike nuclear capability and electronic warfare. For that purpose, DF-21D and DF-carrier killers are positioned along with the type 09IV/V nuclear submarine are deployed.[18] On the other hand, on the second island chain, the core objective is to threaten the US communication lines with Oceania.[19] For this purpose, it utilizes BRI for infrastructural developments in Fiji and Vanuatu

[16] Cropsey, Seth, and Bryan McGrath. n.d. *Maritime Strategy in a New Era of Great Power Competition*.

[17] Green, Michael J., and Andrew Shearer. 2012. "Defining U.S. Indian Ocean Strategy." *The Washington Quarterly* 35 (2): 175–89. https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2012.666925.

[18] Popescu, Alba Iulia Catrinel. n.d. *The 'China's Dream' - the Grand Strategy of Transforming China into a Global Maritime Power*.

[19] Alexander, Lewis M. n.d. *Choke Points of the World Ocean: A Geographic*.

for intelligence surveillance. But China is pursuing grey-zone operations to exert soft control on shipping lanes in the straits of Malacca, Sunda, and Lombok to protect the Chinese energy supply chain. Chinese offensive sea mines are utilized as the key determinants of the effectiveness of their A2/AD strategy.

For the successful A2/AD, China is using the DF-17 hypersonic glide vehicle for choke point denial, and at the same time uses the Type 055 destroyer for shielding the carrier groups. Its power projection capability is determined by the Fujian Type 003 for successful A2/AD.[20]

Figure 2: Great power naval standoff. Source: AirpowerAsia.

Strategic Ambiguity of the Regional Powers

Regional powers are pursuing a cope-up mechanisms given the reality of great power contestation in the critical choke points. It has been crucial in coming up with any coherent strategies in these areas. But they are pursuing strategies to exert control as these areas are the critical junctures for

[20] Till, Geoffrey. 2015. "THE NEW U.S. MARITIME STRATEGY: Another View from Outside." *Naval War College Review* 68 (4): 34–45.

conflict escalation and mitigation. Their strategies in these critical locations are driven by localized A2/AD and consensus with the great powers in terms of burden sharing.

The geographic locations and the extent of amity and enmity with the neighbors are the crucial factors in pursuing coherent strategies in the critical choke points. That's why the strategies of a particular regional hegemon might not be the same as those of others. India's strategy in the Indian Ocean region is primarily focused on surrounding the ocean by establishing naval bases through a conventional patrolling mechanism.[21] Russian control over the Arctic is driven by a similar strategy, with a more localized anti access strategy focused on deterring NATO expansion in its zone of influence.[22] Brazil's navigating strategy in the western hemisphere is primarily driven by not harming the US interest and avoiding unrest.

With an increased surveillance mechanism with enhancing conventional naval capacity, the countries are pursuing a localized area denial mechanism, but their ambition is evident with the increased power projection capacity. Their primary objective is to maintain the status quo in their zone of influence so that they have a comparative advantage over the smaller countries. This comparative advantage is achieved through controlling smaller countries' access to the supply chains of the goods.[23] That's why their primary objective is to have the power to control small states' access to the high sea and critical choke points so that the regional powers possess the striking capacity to impose blockades in wartime and times of tension.

This illustrates that, though the regional powers try to have a localized area denial strategy, they are more driven toward pursuing political denial and showing good intentions in aligning with broader objectives of the great power strategy. Their strategies are ambiguous, where they deal with the great powers through burden sharing and pursuing localized A2/AD, and at the same time use conventional naval power to exert hierarchy over the smaller states.

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[21] Fishman, Edward. 2025. *Chokepoints: American Power in the Age of Economic Warfare*. Penguin Group.

[22] Cropsey, Seth, and Bryan McGrath. n.d. *Maritime Strategy in a New Era of Great Power Competition*.

[23] Alderwick, Jason, and Bastian Giegerich. 2010. "Navigating Troubled Waters: NATO's Maritime Strategy." *Survival* 52 (4): 13–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2010.506814.

Conclusion

Great power maritime strategies are evolving as the dependency on the critical choke points is increasing. Great powers are defined by the extent of their control over global resources, internal balancing capacity, and control over the critical geographies. The contestation is not limited to the US- China rivalry, as maritime choke points are becoming crucial for the regional powers in maintaining their hegemonic status quo in their respective regional security complexes. That means the critical choke points are critical as it does not delimit the conventional great power definition. Rather, geographic proximity, naval capacity, and strategic clearity determines the access and control over geographies proximate to critical choke points. Thus, the critical geographic proximity to critical choke points determines the importance of a particular region and the regional power to become influential in global politics. But their respective balancing powers need to be set in the back of the mind before aligning and balancing against either the US or the China.