

# MARITIME STRATEGIC EVALUATION FOR ISRAEL 2021/22

Chief Editor: Prof. Shaul Chorev

Editor: Dr. Ziv Rubinovitz



Maritime Policy & Strategy Research Centre  
המרכז לחקר מדיניות ואסטרטגיה ימית

## Strategies in the Indo-Pacific Region

*Benni Ben Ari*

### The Region and its Importance

On November 30, 2018, US Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis announced the renaming of the Asia-Pacific Command to the Indo-Pacific Command. This was done in view of the increasing geostrategic and geopolitical importance of the Indian Ocean region.<sup>1</sup> In the White House a position paper was prepared, entitled U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific. One of its goals was to recommend "how to maintain U.S. strategic primacy in the Indo-Pacific region and promote a liberal economic order while preventing China from establishing new, illiberal spheres of influence, and cultivating [by the United States] areas of cooperation to promote regional peace and prosperity [...]".<sup>2</sup>

The Indo-Pacific region, which connects two oceans through the Straits of Malacca, and which borders three continents and 36 countries, is without a doubt the world's largest and most important shipping lane for the near and far future. Practically all of the world powers, including those geographically remote from this region, are increasing their activity and presence there – for geopolitical, geostrategic, and economic reasons. The main activities, crises and geostrategic rivalries and military tensions are playing out in two areas: the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, in the Straits of Malacca.

Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840–1914), one of the greatest naval strategists, recognized the importance and status of the Indian Ocean. He said: "Whoever controls the Indian Ocean, dominates Asia. This ocean is the key to the seven seas. In the twenty-first century, the destiny of the world will be decided on its waters".<sup>3</sup>

The maritime traffic density in the Indo-Pacific is evidently the world's greatest. Approximately 50% of the global container traffic and more than 80% of the world's oil is transported in this region. It is therefore clear that interruption of the security of the shipping lanes has the potential of triggering an economic crisis in the main destination countries (China, India, Japan and South Korea) and the region's countries

<sup>1</sup> J. Garamone, Pacific Command Change Highlights Growing Importance of Indian Ocean Area, *DOD News*, May 30, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific, February, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Ajay Patnaik, Indian Ocean: The key to India's 'Look East Policy', *The Economic Times*, March 21, 2015.

in particular, and to a global crisis in general. This is one of the reasons that India and China (which receive 70% of their oil imports through this region), have altered their maritime strategy in recent years to address these dangers. In addition, several of the world's most critical choke points – Bab-el-Mandeb, Straits of Hormuz, Straits of Malacca, Singapore Straits, the Sunda Strait, the Lombok Strait, the Mozambique Channel, the Taiwan Strait (and even the Suez Canal), and the South China Sea, are all within this region.



Figure 1: The Indo-Pacific Region<sup>4</sup>

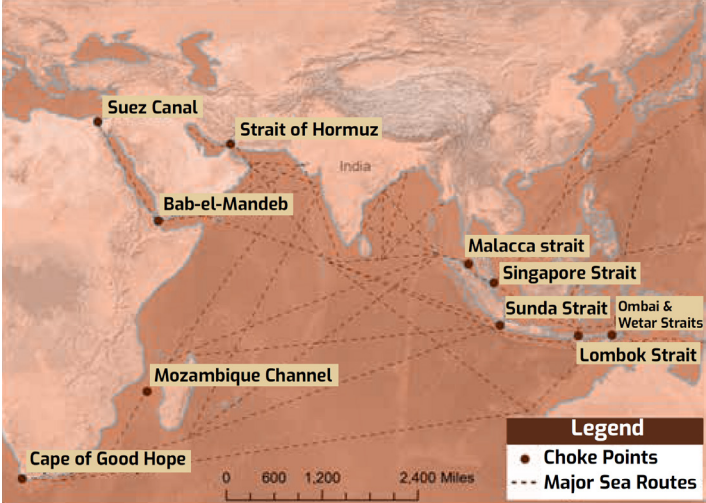


Figure 2: The choke points and sea routes in the Indo-Pacific

<sup>4</sup> D. Camroux, and C. Jaffrelot, The Concept of the Indo Pacific in the Geostrategic Discourse, SciencesPo, October 17, 2021.

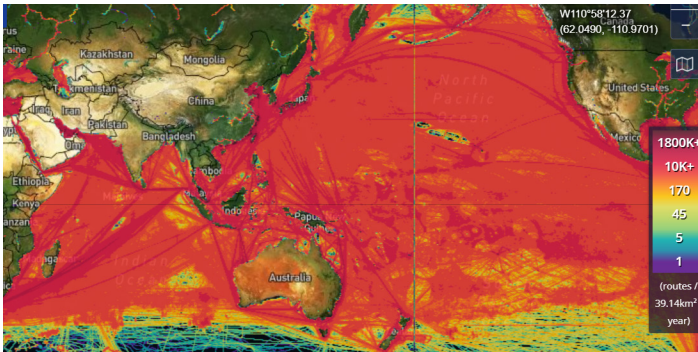


Figure 3: Shipping traffic density in 2020 in the Indo-Pacific region, MarineTraffic

The most explosive international flash points in the world today between the United States and its allies and China is apparently within the confines of the Indo-Pacific, namely – the South China Sea. This fact has resulted in 60% of the United States fleets being present in this arena,<sup>5</sup> which is divided in terms of the United States battle commands between the Central Command – USCENTCOM, and the Indo-Pacific Command – USINDOPACOM (The zone of responsibility of the Indo-Pacific Command has been extended westward as far as the African coast. See Figure 4). Another flash point is Taiwan, which is under perpetual threat by China while at the same time it receives political, and perhaps military backing, from the United States.

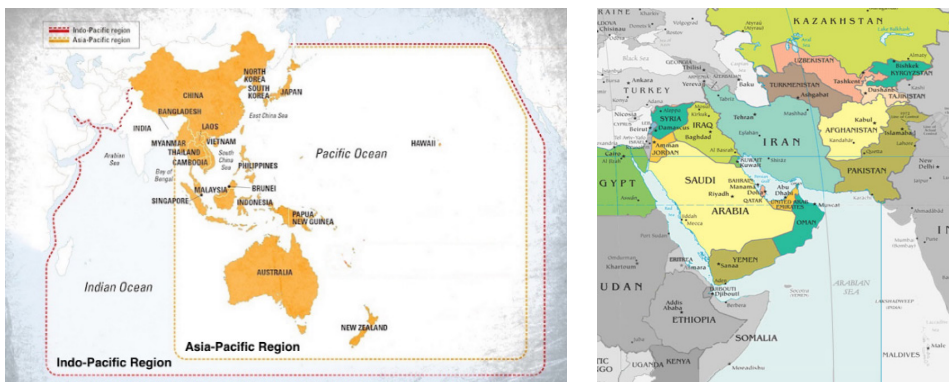


Figure 4: Left: Extending the area of the region under the Indo-Pacific Command.

Right: Central Command, which includes the Middle East and Israel<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Krishn Kaushik, 60% Navy forces in Indo-Pacific region now: US Navy chief, *The Indian Express*, October 13, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> S. Chovev, D. Feith, G. Roughead, S. Cropsey, & J. Dorsett, *Why Does US Central Command Now Include Israel?*, Hudson Institute, January 21, 2021.

The geostrategic importance of the Indo-Pacific region, and in particular the South China Sea, has greatly increased in the past two decades, primarily due to China's military build-up and its show of military and economic presence with the change in its grand strategy to an "Offshore Balancing" strategy, a move which accordingly also changed the naval strategy,<sup>7</sup> and the progress of the Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>8</sup>

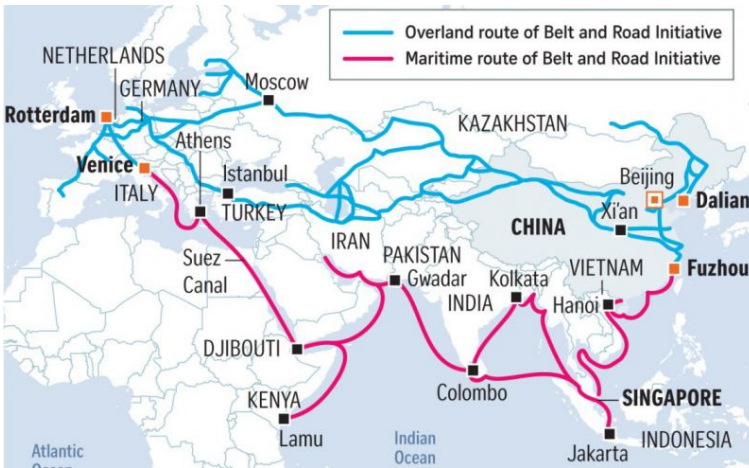


figure 5: China's Belt and Road Initiative for developing infrastructures and economies

Back in 2007, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD),<sup>9</sup> which includes the United States, Japan, Australia and India, coined the phrase "Free and Open Indo-Pacific". This term was later adopted by many other countries that realized that the region was rife with geographic, geopolitical and geostrategic challenges: a top-priority shipping route, piracy, natural disasters, maritime terrorism, military tensions and conflicts, Iranian activity and of course the fear of attempts at altering the regional order. The three principles set for the realization of a free and open region were: 1) Advancing and realizing the order of law, freedom of navigation, free trade etc., 2) The desire for economic growth and prosperity, including trade agreements, partnerships and

<sup>7</sup> See more in Benni Ben Ari's paper "The Cat's Out of the Bag" – Geostrategy and Geopolitics in the South China Sea, October 11, 2021 on the Chaikin Chair for Geostrategy and Maritime Policy and Strategy Research Center [Hebrew].

<sup>8</sup> A. Chatzky, and L. McBride, *China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative*, *Council on Foreign Relations*. January 28, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> "The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue" was set up at Japan's initiative in 2007 but began actual operations in 2017. The dialog was conducted in parallel to joint military exercises of unprecedented scale. The diplomatic and military arrangement was perceived as a reaction against China, which had ramped up its economic and military strength.

investments; 3) Commitment to peace and stability through enforcement of the law of the sea, cooperation on humanitarian aid issues and natural disasters.<sup>10</sup>

The region's countries and other countries, which share the same interests, primarily economic, turned the term into a strategy based on mutual understanding. However the definition does occasionally assume very different meanings, and in some cases the different term is related to a different interpretation of the "regional order of law", however all of the interpretations recognize the importance of maintaining the rules of world order.<sup>11</sup> China itself does not use this term and despite the fact that China is not mentioned by name in the various definitions, the intention of the strategies is to create a move against China in an attempt to check its expansion and its influence in the region.

### China – a geostrategic threat or an economic partner?

In December 1978, Deng Xiaoping, one of the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party, initiated a set of economic reforms which altered the socialist-communist model (which had existed ever since the Mao Zedong era of 1949–1976) of managing the economy based on the principles of communism and a prohibition of private enterprise. China adopted a new system of government – "socialist capitalism", which was also named "socialism with Chinese characteristics".<sup>12</sup> The ultimate goal was to transform China into a superpower, primarily economically. A combination of cultural and traditional values, including the Confucian philosophy, the Sun Tzu theory of war and the hallmarks of the ancient Chinese theory of government, the "Mandate of Heaven", based on the "Five Principles" for existence through engaging its neighbors.<sup>13</sup>

In 1990, in the course of extending the implementation of the reforms, it became necessary to define a grand strategy for China's conduct at the international level. It

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<sup>10</sup> Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Free and Open Indo-Pacific*, April 1, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Felix Heiduk and Gudrun Wacker, *From Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific*, *SWP*, July 1, 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Deng Xiaoping, "Building Socialism with a Specifically Chinese Character", *The People's Daily*, Beijing, June 30, 1984.

<sup>13</sup> The guiding principles of China's policy toward neighboring countries (which were suggested jointly by China, India and Myanmar in the 1950s), were approved by China and include: mutual respect of territorial sovereignty and integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-intervention in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual goodwill and peaceful coexistence. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. The time-tested guideline of China's policy with neighbors, July 30, 2014.

was then that Deng defined the "24-Character Strategy"<sup>14</sup> for achieving the goal of the Chinese leadership, which is to achieve a state in which the economy manages itself according to free market principles, while central economic and political control is maintained. In fact, the most important thing for the Communist Party is its continued rule, and to realize the rigid domestic policy, followed by a like-minded foreign policy. Deng's successors, the "Supreme Leaders", continued with the reform policies which had transformed China into the second largest economic power in the world, with an expectation to take over the first place by 2028.<sup>15</sup> Ever since the 1990s the Chinese economy has been developing across every perceivable parameter. In order to retain China's development, it has to import huge quantities of raw materials, in particular energy components (oil and gas), while at the same time it has to enable exporting its industrial output all over the world.

These past 25 years, the Chinese international trade has increased at an exceptionally rapid pace. In 1995, China's foreign trade – imports and exports – totaled \$281 billion, or 3% of the global trade. In 2018, China's total international trade had grown to \$4.6 trillion, or 12.4% of the global trade. In 2020, China's total imports and exports approached \$5 trillion (32.16 trillion Yuan).

Another, no less important requirement, is the import of food components, the production of which in China is not sufficient to feed its 1.4 billion inhabitants, whose welfare is critical to the continued rule of the Chinese Communist Party. In order to be capable of delivering on all these requirements, China has to have a very large merchant fleet, which is the first or second largest fleet in the world, ensuring the continuation of maritime transport during a crisis. China builds today approximately 40% of all the cargo ships in the world and controls a fleet of over 5,600 ships totaling 270 million DWT.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Deng Xiaoping's 24-Character Strategy was announced in 1990 in response to the world's reaction to the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989. It was also an answer to the reactions within the Chinese Communist Party to the collapse of the Communist countries in East Europe. The strategy, which had been written in 24 Chinese characters, provided basic principles for how China has to protect its national interests while increasing its contacts with the outside world. The strategy was roughly translated so: peaceful observation; safeguarding our position; coping with issues in tranquility; concealing our capabilities and succeeding in our own time; excelling in maintaining a low profile; and never to claim leadership.

<sup>15</sup> [Rating the strong economies: Israel in the 30th place, China and the United States locked in struggle at the top](#), *Ynet*, December 27, 2020 [Hebrew].

<sup>16</sup> "China has become the world's second-largest ship-owning nation", *Institute of Shipping Economics and Logistics*, 18, September 24, 2021.

With the transition to a new naval strategy, "Offshore Balancing", China is significantly enlarging its naval force, including to strengthen its presence in the Indian Ocean. The enlargement includes the navy (currently 335 surface ships of various types, including state-of-the-art nuclear submarines and ships carrying cruise missile and anti-aircraft missile systems; an intelligence estimate states that by 2030 the Chinese navy will have 450 surface ships and 110 submarines), the Coast Guard (including 135 ships of various sizes, some as large as destroyers and larger, which include weapon systems and some even carry a helicopter or UAV's) and the "Maritime Militia" (approximately 300 large ships, up to 500 tons, armed and with detection, command & control systems).<sup>17</sup> 770 operational ships today are supposed to provide a solution for protecting the country's shores and safeguarding open, secure shipping lanes throughout the entire Indo-Pacific region, including achieving a relative advantage in the activity of the Maritime Militia in the "gray zone". (By comparison, the US Navy nowadays operates only 283 ships and submarines).<sup>18</sup>



Figure 6: Chinese Navy ships<sup>19</sup>

To secure the shipping lanes to and from China, China is carrying out, as part of the same strategy, additional activities – diplomatic and economic – which enable its Navy to operate thousands of miles from its home ports in the Indo-Pacific region, primarily in the Indian Ocean, which is the main and most vital route for its economy (the "merchant marine missions" to import and export) and security. The main fear of attacking or blocking of its shipping lanes, and in particular the choke point in the

<sup>17</sup> A. Hollings, "Just How Big Is China's Navy? Bigger Than You Think", *Sandboxx*, July 28, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Military operations that fall within the "Grey Zone," which is a term used to characterize aggressive actions that don't quite meet the criteria to be considered an overt act of war. Grey Zone operations have become an area of increasing focus for nations like China and Russia, who use things like China's Maritime Militia or Russia's mercenary Wagner Group to conduct what are effectively military operations outside the formal purview of their parent state.

<sup>19</sup> Zachary Keyser, "China's navy to test Shandong aircraft carrier in 10-day drill", *Jerusalem Post*, December 30, 2020; Steven Wills, "The Hohenzollern Chinese Navy? Part One", *Center for International Maritime Security*, September 24, 2015.



Straits of Malacca, was raised by President Hu Jintao in November 2003. He termed it "China's Malacca Dilemma".<sup>20</sup> And thus, several years later, in November 2012, during a meeting of the 18th Communist Party Congress, it was decided to build up China into a sea-power nation. Two years later, in 2014, the Chinese Institute of Naval Research published the Strategic Scenario in the Indian Ocean and the Expansion of Chinese Naval Power.<sup>21</sup>



Figure 7: Chinese Coast Guard<sup>22</sup> and "Maritime Militia"<sup>23</sup> vessels

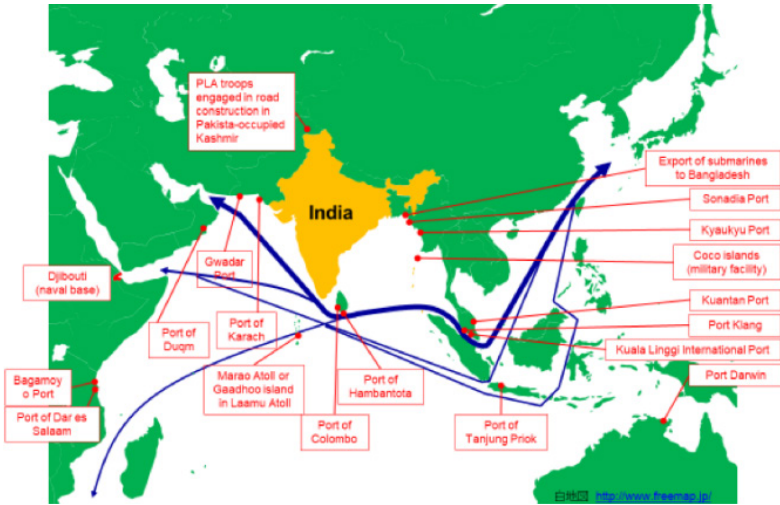


Figure 8: Chinese Economic and military initiatives in the Indian Ocean<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Pawel Paszak, "China and the 'Malacca Dilemma'", *Warsaw Institute*, February 28, 2021.  
<sup>21</sup> TriumphIAS, "Indian Ocean & International Relations", July 8, 2020.  
<sup>22</sup> Caitlin Doornbos, "Chinese law would allow coast guard to fire on foreign vessels in its waters", *Stars and Stripes*, November 5, 2020.  
<sup>23</sup> Zachary Haver, "Unmasking China's Maritime Militia – Analysis", *Eurasia Review*, May 19, 2021.  
<sup>24</sup> TriumphIAS, "Indian Ocean & International Relations", July 8, 2020.

In addition to China's "takeover" of the South China Sea, building and arming seven artificial islands, harassing fishermen from other countries and attempts to obstruct oil exploration by some of the countries in the region, and as part of the strategic plan, China is working to publicize and realize its Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>25</sup> This is a plan consisting of constructing infrastructures for transport and industries and building or acquiring ports which double as naval bases, which have been or will be built in future in Djibouti, Gwadar in Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Sittwe in Myanmar, a port in the Maldivian Islands and other ports, which will serve as maintenance and operational bases along the shipping routes to and from China.



Figure 9: Superpower naval bases in the Indo-Pacific<sup>26</sup>

Despite ongoing attempts, mainly by the United States, to increase freedom of navigation operations (FONOPS) and diplomatic complaints (also reaching out to other navies, including NATO and European, to show a presence in the region), China continues uncompromisingly, for the time being, in its policy in the South China Sea and in the Indo-Pacific region.

<sup>25</sup> Jyotsna Mehra, *A Look at the Indo-Pacific in 2020*, *South Asian Voices*, January 13, 2021.

<sup>26</sup> David Tweed and Adrian Leung, "China is Making a Bold Military Power Play", *Bloomberg*, March 6, 2018.

In addition to these activities, as part of its choice of a new grand strategy (Offshore Balancing), China is apparently expanding the zones of its strategy roll-out westwards in the Indian Ocean, as far as the coast of East Africa by adding two "island chains", numbers four and five, to the three existing island chains east of the Indian Ocean and in the Pacific Ocean.<sup>27</sup>



Figure 10: five island chains in China's naval strategy<sup>28</sup>

As part of the Belt and Road Initiative, China is already active in the western Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea, in infrastructure projects in East Africa, chiefly the Chinese naval base in Djibouti, which adjoins the civilian port, also owned by China, which is intended to receive and support logistically ships as large as aircraft carriers.<sup>29</sup> Various vessels of the Chinese navy participate since 2008 in anti-pirate activities by escorting commercial ships in the Gulf of Aden and the Horn of Africa.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> W. Vorndick, *China's Reach has Grown; So, Should the Islands Chains*, *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*, October 22, 2018.

<sup>28</sup> David Tweed and Adrian Leung, "China is Making a Bold Military Power Play", *Bloomberg*, March 6, 2018; see also "US, UK aircraft carriers lead show of naval might around South China Sea", *Radio Free Asia*, October 7, 2021.

<sup>29</sup> "US, UK aircraft carriers lead show of naval might around South China Sea", *Radio Free Asia*, October 7, 2021; Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "With China, a 'Cold War' Analogy Is Lazy and Dangerous", *New York Times*, November 2, 2021.

<sup>30</sup> Antik Panda, "China Dispatches New Naval Fleet for Gulf of Aden Escort Mission", *The Diplomat*, December 11, 2018.



Figure 11: A Chinese warship, type 071 amphibious transport dock ship, entering the Port of Djibouti<sup>31</sup>

## The FOIP strategy – Free and Open Indo Pacific

In recent years, geopolitical developments have moved numerous global and regional powers, including India, the United States, Japan, Australia, ASEAN and the European Union countries, to express the Indo-Pacific Region vision and to form bilateral and multilateral partnerships in order to advance the strategic frameworks for cooperation. This is in order to check China's ascent, which is defined as a "strategic competitor" of the United States and its allies in various areas, including advanced technologies, international trade, national security (including its enlargement of its nuclear arsenal) and so forth.

The United States is the leader in setting and realizing the "Indo-Pacific Strategy". In a Congressional debate on China's power and behavior it was said that "China is not an Olympian power".<sup>32</sup> This is a serious misunderstanding of the situation and of China's strategy. But despite this, the attitude toward China's activity is serious, partly because it confronts the United States' allies – India, Philippines, Vietnam and others, especially in the South China Sea, and threatens Taiwan. The geopolitical situation with Iran and the Coronavirus pandemic have proven to be a potent catalyst for broader acceptance of this strategic framework and for greater collaboration and despite the restrictions the pandemic has imposed – the pandemic which originated in China – the Indo-Pacific has received a tremendous diplomatic boost. The European Union countries are under increasing US pressure to make a commitment, whether

<sup>31</sup> Sam LaGrone, "AFRICOM: Chinese Naval Base in Africa Set to Support Aircraft Carriers", *USNI News*, April 20, 2021.

<sup>32</sup> Colin Clark, "China 'Not An Olympian Power': Presumptive China Ambassador 'Confident' In US", *Breaking Defense*, October 20, 2021.

direct or indirect, to the Indo-Pacific region and, as a consequence, to support the United States against China.<sup>33</sup> It is doubtful whether these countries should agree to the US request and are responding appropriately with such a move.

A position paper written for the White House says that "From the national security standpoint, need to decide how to maintain U.S. strategic primacy in the Indo-Pacific region and promote a liberal economic order while preventing China from establishing new, illiberal spheres of influence, and cultivating areas of cooperation to promote regional peace and prosperity. [...] Preserve U.S. economic, diplomatic, and military access to the most populous region of the world and more than one-third of the global economy[...] Loss of U.S. preeminence in the Indo-Pacific would weaken our ability to achieve U.S. interests globally."<sup>34</sup>

Cooperation between the United States and other countries is expressed mainly in a show of presence through conducting joint exercises throughout the Indo-Pacific, including in the South China Sea. Part of these actions are "Freedom of Navigation Operations" – FONOPS which, undoubtably, will intensify China's naval activity and raise tensions in the region. Vessels from eight remote countries, which are not part of the dispute in the South China Sea, have sailed this region in the past year, and have exercised in this area,<sup>35</sup> including a passage of a NATO task force, led by the United Kingdom's *Queen Elizabeth* Aircraft carrier with vessels from The Netherlands, United States, New Zealand, Australia and the United Kingdom.<sup>36</sup>

Despite the tendency in the United States to sound as if it is in a Cold War with China, Joseph S. Nye Jr. rejects this definition and states that in contrast to the Cold War with the Soviet Union, which was based on military and ideological motives, in which containment was a practical goal, the competition with China is a lot more nuanced and there is also a dimension of the economic and social interdependency. The "game" is three-dimensional and includes a division of power at all levels – military, social and economic. A two-dimensional conflict is confusing and misleading in that it underestimates the real challenge posed to the United States – and suggests ineffective strategies. Due to the geopolitical and geo-economic situation around

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<sup>33</sup> Council of the European Union, "EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo Pacific – Council conclusions", April 16, 2021.

<sup>34</sup> U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo Pacific.

<sup>35</sup> Ralph Jennings, Increase in South China Sea Naval Activity Expected to Provoke Beijing, *Voice of America (VOA)*, August 27, 2021.

<sup>36</sup> US, UK aircraft carriers lead show of naval might around South China Sea, *Radio Free Asia*, October 7, 2021.

the world and vis-à-vis China, and due to China's military buildup, Nye states that "For better and worse, we are locked in a "cooperative rivalry" with China that requires a strategy that can accomplish those two contradictory things – compete and cooperate – at the same time."<sup>37</sup> Nye suggests several moves and sums up: "Pessimists look at China's population size and economic growth rates and believe they will prevail. But if we treat our allies as assets, the combined military strength and economic wealth of Western-aligned democracies – the United States, Europe, Japan – will far exceed that of China well into this century."<sup>38</sup>

India, in addition to expanding its economic relations with the countries in the region, is promoting its main policy goal, which is to prevent China from dominating the region and blocking its own ascendant power in South Asia and the Indian Ocean, which are India's "backyard". Since India has an ongoing dispute with China over its Himalaya border, in addition to its desire to maintain trade and diplomatic relations, it employs a policy of "Evasive Balancing", meaning balancing while attempting to calm the target to believe that nothing is being done. "Evasive Balancing" includes a combination of balancing and calming elements.<sup>39</sup> To shore up this policy, India issues prolific diplomatic and other statements that it has no intention of restraining China and that it will not join any anti-China alliance. India's policy is in fact unclear, given the fact that it is a member of the QUAD alliance. Thus, it seems that India will not be able to persuade China that it has no hostile intentions while it will not be able to deliver on what its QUAD allies want of her.<sup>40</sup>

ASEAN countries have been in a problematic situation with China for many years. Most are closely tied to China economically, in particular Laos and Cambodia, which are almost Chinese proxy states. They are having difficulties choosing who to support in the long term and to whose bloc they should belong – the United States or China. It is highly likely that there will not be a clear-cut choice of one over the other and that they will maintain economic and diplomatic contacts concurrently with both sides. The conflict in the South China Sea also influences the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam, which are at a conflict of interests with China on a virtually daily basis. The continuation of the discussions regarding the Code of Conduct (COC)

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<sup>37</sup> Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *With China, a 'Cold War' Analogy Is Lazy and Dangerous*, *New York Times*, November 2, 2021.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Raymond Ridderhof, *Indo-Pacific Strategies*, *Peace Palace Library*, 29 July 2021.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

for the South China Sea might also be a contribution as the basis for naval vessels' behavior in the Indo-Pacific.

The European Union countries reached a significant decision on April 16, 2021 concerning the Indo-Pacific region. The first paragraph says:

The Council considers that the EU should reinforce its strategic focus, presence and actions in the Indo-Pacific with the aim of contributing to the stability, security, prosperity and sustainable development of the region, based on the promotion of democracy, rule of law, human rights and international law.<sup>41</sup>

An explanatory document that was issued later stated that the region was gaining strategic importance to the EU's countries because of the growing economy, the demographics and political issues that were turning the region into a "key player" shaping the world order and posing global challenges. In its reasons for deciding on the strategy for collaboration between the European Union and the Indo-Pacific, it is emphasized that 70% of all global trade and over 60% of all Foreign Direct Investments are between these two regions.

The main components of the European Union's Indo-Pacific strategy will be increased engagement with an interest in maintaining the Indo-Pacific region free and open to all while building strong, long-lasting partnerships. The basic message is that the European Union is going to deepen its engagement with its Indo-Pacific partners in order to respond to the emerging dynamic, which has an effect on the regional stability. The European Union's approach is intended to cultivate an international order based on rules, a level playing field, and an open and fair environment for trade and investment, for coping with climate change and for supporting connectivity with the European Union.<sup>42</sup> The purpose of involving the European Union countries in the Indo-Pacific region is not to create conflict with China, but rather to create collaborations with any country willing to cooperate. At the same time the EU countries will work to build collaborations with China. The European Union countries already have various agreements with many countries in the region, including Thailand, Malaysia, Australia, New Zealand, India, Japan, South Korea, Singapore and others. The European Union countries will also work to safeguard freedom of navigation and maritime security through the presence of navy vessels along the region's shipping lanes.

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<sup>41</sup> EU Strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific – Council conclusions, 16 April 2021.

<sup>42</sup> Questions and Answers: EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, 16 September 2021

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## Conclusion

Although China does not use the term "Indo-Pacific", and although it has not published any document on this issue, its behavior in realizing its maritime strategy, including the Belt and Road Initiative, has been ongoing for several decades now and has consistently been accomplishing one goal after another. It is highly doubtful that it will be possible to alter the situation in the South China Sea or to undo the "achievements" of China's Belt and Road Initiative and one of its key components of additional ports within the Indo-Pacific region, serving the Chinese Navy for refueling and maintenance. Neither will it be possible to roll back the scaling up of the Chinese Navy and the substantial improvement in its quality. China continues to claim it has no aggressive intentions nor that it has any desire to supplant the United States' hegemony in the Indo-Pacific region. President Xi, in his speech on October 25, 2021, said: "(The Chinese people) have always pursued an independent foreign policy of peace, upheld justice and resolutely opposed hegemonism and power politics".<sup>43</sup> He added that only the 193 United Nations member states can together draft international laws and obey them. According to President Xi, "China wants prosperity for all – not global hegemony".<sup>44</sup>

The United States is continuing to issue negative responses to China's behavior in the Indo-Pacific region. The Pentagon, on October 26, issued the following statement: "China continues to bully its neighbors to try to coerce them into behavior that is more in keeping with China's national security or economic interests. And we don't believe that this is conducive to a free and open Indo-Pacific".<sup>45</sup> And on the other hand the *South China Morning Post* reported that the United States had carried out 2000 espionage missions against China. "US ships and planes conducted 2,000 spying missions aimed at China this year, says military analyst".<sup>46</sup>

Paul Kennedy also testifies to the geostrategic situation: "Changes in global politics, armed forces and economics means America has a new contender for supremacy".<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Danson Cheong, *No one country or bloc can dictate global rules, says President Xi as China marks 50 years at UN*, *The Straits Times*, October 25, 2021.

<sup>44</sup> Tweed and Leung, "China Is Making a Bold Military Power Play".

<sup>45</sup> Lalit K. Jha, "China continues to bully its neighbours, not conducive to free & open Indo-Pacific: Pentagon", *The Print*, October 26, 2021.

<sup>46</sup> Liu Zhen, "US Ships and Planes Conducted 2,000 Spying Missions Aimed at China This Year, Says Military Analyst", *South China Morning Post*, October 28, 2021.

<sup>47</sup> Paul Kennedy, "Paul Kennedy on whether China's rise means America's fall", *The Economist*, September 1, 2021.



The navies of the United States and its allies have, without a doubt, at the end of 2021, a technological advantage and are with better naval experience than the Chinese Navy (which in fact had never participated in significant naval combat). However, it is unclear that the outcome of a conflict between the American and Chinese navies would be clearly in favor of the United States and its allies. China has the ability to place a greater number of vessels armed with advanced armaments. Moreover, China is able to conduct military activities through its Naval Militia, which would position the conflict within the "gray zone", making it difficult for the United States and its allies' navies to respond.<sup>48</sup> As time passes, the relative advantage to the United States' forces, including that of its Navy, is diminishing. This raises questions: Will the United States be willing to invest the budget necessary for preserving its relative advantage? And what will happen if China on its part decides to invest whatever it takes to achieve a military advantage over the United States? This is in view of the steady growth of the Chinese economy, with its population of 1.4 billion citizens capable of generating huge budgets for its defense.<sup>49</sup> There is no doubt that a formidable, extremely dangerous adversary has arisen for the United States.

China's response to the increased naval activity includes, of course, official complaints, but it also includes intensification of the navy's activity and exercises demonstrating its power. In the Indian Ocean region, China is conducting intelligence patrols by submarine and surface ships. But it is highly unlikely that a clash or contact between the Chinese Navy and other navies will take place in the Indian Ocean; this possibility does however exist in the South China Sea.

On geostrategic and geopolitical issues, the Chinese are behaving in accordance with their ancient culture and traditions in mind. The Confucian and Sun Tsu doctrines are the basis. Among these rules of behavior is the practice of telling "polite lies".<sup>50</sup> There is no doubt that the Chinese leadership, as well as the media, use this practice as needed, when answering international entities and also for domestic policy purposes. This behavior sometimes leads to misunderstandings and even to awkwardness.

The activity of American forces, in particular freedom of navigation patrols and intelligence sorties of US Navy spy planes, and the joining of foreign navies for a show

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<sup>48</sup> Tom O'Connor and Naveed Jamali, "As China Gray Zone Warfare Escalates, U.S. May Stand to Lose First Shooting Battle", *Newsweek*, March 4, 2021.

<sup>49</sup> Kennedy, "Paul Kennedy on whether China's rise means America's fall".

<sup>50</sup> This issue is discussed in the book entitled *Lies That Bind: Chinese Truth, Other Truths* by Susan D. Blum on the AMAZON website.

of force are extremely troubling to the Chinese authorities. The truth is that there is no infringement of the freedom of navigation, neither of naval ships and certainly not of merchant ships (China would be the first to suffer from any obstruction to the trade routes in the South China Sea), and the issue is being managed through exchanges of allegations and protests. Chinese aircraft and vessels are scrambled to track and warn, actions which might, should human error intervene, cause severe incidents. The continuation of the foreign activities and their intensification are, from the Chinese standpoint, provocations. And indeed, as part of a policy which in Western eyes appears very aggressive and provocative, China is continuing to develop and improve defense systems based on a strategy of "Offshore Balancing". The main problem is, apparently, that western countries, primarily the United States, conduct their activities vis-à-vis China based on western philosophy and culture, which defines methods of governance, of managing and making decisions – on a totally different basis than what is common in China. The very fact that China is designated as a Communist country, based on a supposedly Marxist-Leninist ideology, is in itself a barrier that places China in the enemy camp. Therefore, the approach to China should be modified: its history and traditions should be taken into consideration when these occur in their behavioral patterns. This approach is not being applied and the United States policy toward China nowadays is virtually unchanged from the Mao era.

The new strategic-technological agreement between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States (AUKUS) is intended to enable them to prevail in the event that an armed conflict should break out. Using modern nuclear submarines will enable the said navies to operate in relative confidence, however only in another decade or two, in the regions of the South China Sea and the Straits of Taiwan, while surface ships will be less active since they will be subjected to the continuing threat of China's anti-ship missile systems.

Freedom of navigation, which is by no means diminished, is not China's main problem in the South China Sea. Issues such as the search for raw materials and energy and fishing are those which will underpin the dispute between China and its neighbors. There have already been incidents in which the Chinese Coast Guard and its Maritime Militia have attempted to stop fishing activities of neighboring countries and also to disrupt oil and gas drilling.

Graham Allison presents a more pessimistic position. He concludes that China and the United States are on a collision course leading to war even though neither of

them wants it. The reason is the Thucydides Trap.<sup>51</sup> Chinese President Xi Jinping and former US President Donald Trump promised to make their countries "Great Again". China, which is unstoppable, is gaining ground on a complacent United States and any mishap or misunderstanding or mistake in the Indo-Pacific region, and in particular in the South China Sea, can trigger armed conflict. Allison explains in his book why the Thucydides Trap is the lens through which the US-China relations must be understood in the twenty-first century. In order to prevent war, China has got to tone down its economic and political ambitions and the United States will apparently have to accept that fact that it is going to be relegated to the position of Number Two in the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>52</sup>

The situation can also be examined and referred to according to what Moeller wrote, "Beijing is not a systematic enemy. It wants to be part of the global system."<sup>53</sup>

US Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks, said at the Aspen Security Forum on April 30, 2021: "[...] Let there be no doubt, China presents a real and enduring challenge [...] Despite concerns, diplomacy is important, and conflict with China is neither desirable nor inevitable [...]".<sup>54</sup>

And Mark Valencia summed it up: "The US is putting the military cart before the diplomatic horse".<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> "It was the Athenian ascendancy and the fear this bred in Sparta, which made war inevitable". This sentence was written by Greek historian Thucydides, who was referring to the reason for the outbreak of the great war between Athens and Sparta in the fifth century BC. Thucydides believed that the rise in Athenian military and economic power created tensions in Sparta, which had been the regional power until then. This tension greatly increased the likelihood of conflict and all that was necessary was a small spark to touch off a firestorm. The match came in the form of a conflict between two second-tier city-states, Korinthos and Kerkira (Corfu), which dragged Athens and Sparta into a 30-year war that shattered Greece and laid it exposed to outside invaders. Ofir Dor, "The Powers' Trap: What Is the Connection between the Sparta-Athens War and the China-US Tensions?" *Calcalist*, August 11, 2017 [Hebrew]. The article reviews Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can American and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017.

<sup>52</sup> Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can American and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017.

<sup>53</sup> J. O. Moeller, "Global Power Puzzle: Why China's Rise Doesn't Cause a Problem, *The National Interest*, September 10, 2021.

<sup>54</sup> David Vergun, "Deputy Defense Secretary Says Conflict with China Is Not Inevitable", *Department of Defense News*, April 30, 2021.

<sup>55</sup> Mark J. Valencia, "South China Sea: the US is putting the military cart before the diplomatic horse", *South China Morning Post*, September 17, 2021.

If we also take into consideration Paul Kennedy's words, then it is almost certain that under any circumstances, diplomacy is preferable to military action and it is possible that agreement on a Code of Conduct, which is being discussed in protracted meetings between ASEAN countries and China, with all its drawbacks, is the only solution.

Although Israel is far from the dynamic Indo-Pacific region, it is nevertheless important both to its national economy and security. Israel has good trade and diplomatic relations with some of the countries in the region, mainly India, South Korea and others. A large proportion of the trade with the countries in the Far East passes through the Indo-Pacific shipping lanes. The new relations with some of the Persian Gulf countries also involve maritime transportation of energy and other commodities. And most importantly, Iran, which still seeks to annihilate Israel, is, and apparently will continue, working against Israel including in the Arabian Sea and in the Straits of Bab el-Mandeb. Israel therefore has to carefully monitor developments in the region and be aware of the activities which might pose a strategic threat or problem on the part of hostile countries.