

# The Nagging Question in the Indo-Pacific

by Phillip Orchard - August 2, 2021

Senior U.S. diplomats were fanned out across the Indo-Pacific last week. U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin toured Southeast Asia, outlining to circumspect U.S. partners a vision for “integrated deterrence” and, in Manila, tending to **a festering wound** at the heart of U.S. regional strategy. This followed Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman’s visits to Seoul and Tokyo, indispensable U.S. allies whose **resentment for each other** is a big problem for the U.S. alliance structure. Her boss, Antony Blinken, dropped by India to continue transforming the “Quad” from **a reluctant talk shop** to a coalition with teeth. Meanwhile, at home, the annual bureaucratic donnybrook over the Pentagon’s budget is in full swing, with profound debates over how best to sustain U.S. naval supremacy in the Indo-Pacific (How many ships? What type? What role for unmanned ships?) appearing nowhere close to resolution.

The flurry of activity can be tied to a single, nagging question: Can China win? Or, can China’s developing capabilities – hypersonic missiles, warships, cyberweapons, space and information domain assets, and so forth – nullify Washington’s naval superiority, particularly in China’s front yard? What happens if China succeeds simply in making it too costly for the U.S. to risk a fight?

In truth, the question will probably never be fully answered. It would take a war to do so, and war would be disastrous for everyone involved. Yet the uncertainty itself will be a defining feature in the regional landscape likely for decades to come.

## The U.S. Navy’s Dominance

It’s hard to imagine how the latter half of the 19th century would have played out had the U.S. Navy faced a comparable rival. Its dominance allowed Europe to eschew cyclical conflict for economic and political integration, and it allowed Japan to maintain a largely pacifist posture for nearly half a century. It helped keep the Cold War from turning hot. It allowed the U.S. the domestic security and economic vitality to play a proactive offshore balancing role, discouraging far-flung emerging powers from becoming regional hegemonies. And, for better or for worse, it allowed the U.S. to play the role of global policeman. Perhaps most important, it guaranteed the security of international sea lanes, unleashing the unprecedented boom in maritime trade and fundamentally rewiring the global economy.

Still, it's reasonable to wonder just how good the U.S. Navy actually is. For all its experience supporting combat operations against weaker powers in the Middle East and elsewhere, it hasn't fought a conventional naval battle since 1944. The gap between the U.S. Navy and those of its potential rivals was so large, and so expensive to narrow, that no potential rival, not even the Soviets, ever really tried to match it. In other words, the main success of the U.S. Navy was in making it so it would never have to really fight.

But there's only so much a fighting force can learn about its capabilities and vulnerabilities from war games, computer simulations (in which the U.S. hasn't exactly lived up to its reputation recently) and supporting roles against land-based foes. And the risks of a dominant navy becoming overconfident and blind to its own vulnerabilities have been borne out repeatedly throughout history.

Moreover, U.S. naval dominance is under pressure from multiple directions. The U.S. military's misadventures in the 1990s and 2000s made the U.S. at once overstretched and underweighted in the region that would matter most in the 2010s onward. It now seems to understand that it needs to adopt a more subtle strategy of bending global affairs to its interests and avoiding the temptation to be everywhere at once. The U.S. Navy is, of course, still vital in this regard; no component of the U.S. military is more important to sustaining the flexibility to project power decisively from a smaller footprint. But it's enough to compel far-flung allies, particularly those in the Western Pacific and eastern Indian Ocean, to take on greater responsibility for regional security burdens.

## **China's Rise**

The main threat to U.S. dominance, of course, is China. Over the past 20 or so years, Beijing has embarked on a long-term campaign to develop its maritime forces, and the resulting challenge is unlike anything the U.S. has ever faced. (Even the Soviet Union, which had a greater geographic and strategic imperative to focus primarily on controlling the Eurasian landmass, could rely more on the force of its ideology, its long-range nuclear arsenal and its talent for trapping the U.S. in proxy conflicts.) For the first time in its history, China has an imperative to become a maritime power. Its biggest strategic dilemma is its need for secure access to the Pacific and Indian oceans, access that could be severed by foreign navies around a series of chokepoints running from the Senkakus to the Malacca Strait. And China has the economic dynamism, industrial capacity and technological growth needed to make it happen.

## China's Maritime Chokepoints



[\(click to enlarge\)](#)

Its naval buildup has thus been remarkable in its scale and speed. In terms of fleet size, the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is nearing parity with the U.S. Navy. Moreover, the Chinese navy is bolstered by thousands of paramilitary vessels from the coast guard and the maritime militia – lightly armed fishing vessels that report directly to the PLA – that can act as force multipliers in China’s littoral waters. Already, they are the vanguard of Beijing’s efforts to enforce its territorial claims and intimidate other South China Sea claimant states into seeing China’s regional supremacy as inevitable.



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This doesn’t mean the PLAN would stand a chance against the U.S. fleet in a conventional naval battle in open waters. Fleet size and composition tell us only so much about a navy’s capabilities.

Technological sophistication, fleet composition, training, operational experience and logistics support networks are also all key – and in most of these areas, the Chinese navy is widely believed to still be decades behind the U.S.

Still, the U.S. should be concerned. As with all dimensions of China's rise, trajectory is more important than the current balance of forces. China has quickly weaned itself off foreign components and technology. In 2015, the Pentagon rated 70 percent of Chinese submarines (both nuclear- and diesel-powered), destroyers and frigates as being of "modern design," compared to 30-40 percent just a decade earlier. Moreover, its ability to play catch-up in technologies with potential "dual-use" commercial-military applications – cyberspace, artificial intelligence, telecommunications and outer space – shouldn't be dismissed.

Plus, if the U.S. and China go to war in the foreseeable future, China would almost certainly be fighting with home-field advantage, allowing it to structure its defenses in a way that offsets its weaknesses and amplifies its strengths. It couldn't do that if it tried to take on the U.S. Navy in the middle of the Pacific. Beijing understands as much, and though its long-term strategic plans call for its capabilities to dominate distant waters, its overwhelming focus for now is on creating a "fortress fleet" to establish a gradually expanding protective buffer in its littoral waters. The goal here is to make the price too high for an outside navy to threaten the mainland or intervene on Taiwan's behalf, to persuade weaker regional states that their best bet is to ally with Beijing, and to project enough force to be able to secure its maritime chokepoints. And its prospects for success here are growing. China's buildup of anti-ship missiles alone could very well diminish the operational value of the cornerstone of the U.S. Navy – the aircraft carrier strike group – to the point of being obsolete.

## **King of the Seas**

Of course, the same strengths that allowed the U.S. to achieve naval dominance in the first place haven't gone away. Its technological base is unmatched, putting it in a reasonably solid position to stay a step ahead and parry whatever China comes up with. The U.S. economy may prove far more resilient than China's, allowing it to sustain funding for these sorts of next-generation capabilities – not to mention to engage in economic warfare to potentially kneecap China's ability to sustain its trajectory.

Moreover, the U.S. has spent more than a century building its alliance structure, and China will have an enormously difficult time building its own. Beijing hopes that its neighbors will eventually see that accommodating Chinese regional hegemony is in their own interest, but in the meantime, it's largely compelling them to look for ways to sustain the balance of power. Some, like Japan, are clearly

bulking up for a fight. At minimum, China's buildup will continue to induce tighter military cooperation among regional powers such as Japan, Australia, India and Singapore, as well as some enterprising Europeans. To sustain its edge and maintain the ability to operate in the face of China's anti-access/area denial buffer, the U.S. will need a more decentralized force posture featuring counterstrike batteries and rapid deployment positions across the first island chain. At present, it's **struggling** to persuade regional partners to give it the access needed for this; given the uncertainty, most regional states are hedging their bets. But the U.S. is still far more likely than China to get the regional support it needs.

Even so, history has shown repeatedly that dominance the likes of the U.S. Navy can't last forever and that the downfall is typically preceded by technological shifts, domestic rot, inertia and strategic arrogance. The development of carrier-based air power and long-range submarines ended the primacy of battleships. The next great power war will hinge on which side is best-equipped to blind the enemy, and thus command of the sea will soon hinge on command of the space and cyber realms. For all its strengths, U.S. dysfunction at home warrants real skepticism about its ability to harness its resources and execute a steady, comprehensive strategy in these domains. If the U.S. repeats the age-old mistake of preparing to fight the next war as if it were the last, it may very well lose even before shots are fired.

Given its economic and political fragility and geographic vulnerabilities, China may prove to be a paper tiger. But its prospects are strong enough that both the U.S. and its friends in the region, for the first time in several generations, are thinking seriously about how to adapt to an environment in which the U.S. is no longer the unquestioned king of the seas.

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