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« China, geopolitics and the sea »

China stands as one of the oldest continuous political entities in the world, wielding an unassailable status as an inescapable regional superpower across East Asia, yet historically managing a vastly more relative global destiny. During the 19th century, despite its monumental geographic size and population, it buckled under the relentless structural battering of European imperialist powers, spearheaded by the British Empire.

Throughout the 20th century, to brutal external Japanese military aggression was added a fierce, protracted civil war. Even the victory of the Chinese Communist Party in 1949 failed to politically or economically stabilize mainland China for several subsequent decades, while nevertheless converting the nation into a highly singular, isolated geopolitical entity.

The profound structural mutation initiated during the 1980s ultimately culminated in its landmark integration into the World Trade Organization in 2001. Its rapid transformation into the undisputed "workshop of the world" completely reshaped its historical destiny, a trajectory where the sea now occupies a pivotal central position regarding commercial shipping loops (imports and exports), infrastructural development diplomacy (the Belt and Road Initiative), and hard-power geopolitical projection across its immediate maritime ranges (the Pacific and Indian Oceans) as well as the wider global stage (threading relations with the United States, Russia, and the Global South).

A Singular Relationship to the Maritime Domain

Ancient Imperial China maintained a singular relationship with the sea, characteristically structured around a balanced matrix of commercial trade and tributary vassalization binding its entire maritime rim (Japan, Korea, the Ryukyu Kingdom, the East Indies, and Siam). However, when contrasted with Western Europe's expansionism, China's imperial statecraft long appeared to manifest a structural rejection of seaborne power projection. Marine historians explicitly analyze the extensive early 15th-century blue-water expeditions led by Admiral Zheng He across the Indian Ocean under the Ming Dynasty as a monumental missed historical opportunity.

Above all, Imperial China commanded a deeply self-contained economy with limited structural requirements for the open sea, an isolationist doctrine that the Ming authorities formally legislated in 1634 (*the Haijin decrees*). Merchant shipping nonetheless persisted through heavily restricted enclaves with arriving European traders: notably the Portuguese in Macau, the Spanish in Manila, and the British merchants driving the *East India Company*.

During the 18th century, Chinese authorities still masterfully dictated the terms of these commercial exchanges. However, Great Britain—rapidly followed by alternate Western imperialist powers—aggressively maneuvered to break the Chinese economic model and erode imperial authority throughout the 19th century. The Opium Wars functioned as the raw military iron driven deep into the Chinese nation, while the resulting Unequal Treaties operated as the diplomatic pen that engineered China's painful semi-colonization.

In 1895, following the First Sino-Japanese War, a rising Meiji Japan forcefully annexed the island of Formosa to feed its young imperialist appetite. The deep structural humiliation of China triggered violent backlashes: the conservative, anti-foreign Boxer Rebellion was thoroughly crushed by an international coalition in 1901, while the progressive mobilization culminated in the Xinhai Revolution of 1911, permanently toppling the imperial system to proclaim a Republic.

Nevertheless, the first half of the 20th century transformed into a long, cataclysmic ordeal of systemic violence. The chaotic reign of rival Warlords was rapidly succeeded by a bloody civil war pitting Nationalists against Communists, a conflict only temporarily paused by the terrible, widespread Japanese invasion of 1937. This era ultimately concluded with the Red victory of 1949 and the creation of a

nationalist enclave in Taiwan, which remained the sole internationally recognized "China" on the global stage for two consecutive decades.

The victory of Mao Zedong's Communist Party did not signal the end of China's structural misfortunes, triggering immense humanitarian and economic catastrophes through the Great Leap Forward of the late 1950s and the radical devastation of the Cultural Revolution during the 1960s. By 1970, China stood as a profoundly isolated geopolitical anomaly: a socialist dictatorship locked in a bitter ideological rupture with Moscow, a gigantic and overpopulated nation mired in deep underdevelopment, commanding zero statistical relevance in terms of international foreign trade or merchant maritime transport.

The decade of the 1970s thoroughly inverted this trajectory. Mao Zedong passed away in 1976, not without having previously validated a historic, strategic diplomatic opening toward the United States. Once the final political convulsions of radical Maoism were contained, 1979 marked the official dawn of a greenfield historical era. Deng Xiaoping locked into place his famous pragmatic doctrine of de-ideologization: *"It matters not whether a cat is black or white, so long as it catches mice, it is a good cat."* Crucially, this structural transformation was funneled directly through maritime port gateways, materialized in 1980 by the engineering of the first four Special Economic Zones strategically clustered adjacent to the colonial hubs of Hong Kong and Macau (Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Shantou, and Xiamen). In 1984, fourteen major coastal cities were officially declared "open ports," their greenfield free-trade zones rapidly absorbing massive industrial offshoring from Western and Asian corporations. By 1990, it was the metropolis of Shanghai and its sprawling port complex that powerfully reconnected with its historical narrative of global commercial openness.

The desire for structural political transformation voiced by the student youth was brutally crushed in 1989 during the Tiananmen Square massacre. The ruling elite rigidly refused to endure the disintegrating destiny of the Soviet Union, maintaining the unassailable, absolute authority of the Communist Party, which had perfectly integrated the existential interest of economic liberalization and globalized trade integration—henceforth the supreme axiom of Beijing. It concurrently maintained a highly specific, transactional relationship with Washington.

At the close of the 1990s, China stood resiliently through the Asian Financial Crisis, while successfully orchestrating the historic handovers of Hong Kong (1997) and Macau (1999), potent symbols erasing centuries of European colonial incursions and humiliations.

The Clinton administration aggressively pursued a normalization protocol with Beijing, operating under the liberal thesis that economic opening would mechanically force China into political democratization. In late 1999, Washington and Beijing signed a landmark bilateral commercial treaty focusing on the sweeping opening of the Chinese domestic marketplace, securing full American diplomatic underwriting for China's integration into the global trade body. The European Union rapidly aligned on this identical diplomatic line, with Brussels signing a treaty with Beijing in 2000 to lift the final regulatory hurdles blocking its accession. Marine and global historians will henceforth judge this specific Western vision as the official birth of a monumental, multi-decade "strategic naivety, as it permanently unlocked the spectacular, unassailable return of China into the premier tier of global affairs.

A Maritime-Dependent Economic Superpower

China's official integration into the WTO on December 1, 2001, following more than a decade of protracted negotiations, fundamentally transformed both the historical destiny of the country and the face of the global economy. Capitalizing on the momentum of its corporate welcoming policies launched two decades prior, the massive socialist nation converted into the ultimate theater for international offshoring and transnational subcontracting.

Naturally, over the two subsequent decades, China captured total industrial autonomy, executing a powerful upward migration along the value chain masterminded by its proprietary industrial giants. This technological ambition was structurally encoded in 2015 under the "Made in China 2025" master plan, establishing world-class competencies across strategic sectors: including advanced transport equipment, aerospace engineering, robotics, mechanized agricultural machinery, high-tech medical devices, and marine renewable energies.

These structural overhauls of the Chinese economy deeply impacted the maritime industries. The State organized and consolidated massive public conglomerates, positioning China Merchants and COSCO at the absolute summit of the global shipowning and logistics rankings. China Merchants is heavily positioned within energy shipping, port terminal concessions, and third-party forwarding via *Sinotrans*. Concurrently active across all global shipping domains, COSCO reigns as the world's 4th largest container

line. To this corporate panorama must be added the state-backed agricultural trading giant COFCO, which now commands an unassailable global dimension, alongside CSSC, the undisputed number-one shipbuilder worldwide.

In terms of seaborne freight logistics, the post-2001 expansion of containerized exports proved fantastic. In 2005, the country's top ten ports handled an aggregate 65 million TEUs; by 2025, this metric skyrocketed to 256 million TEUs—a fourfold volume expansion within two decades.

Across the last calendar year, unified throughput metrics for all Chinese maritime gateways crested at 312 million TEUs, and soared to 354 million TEUs when integrating inland river ports. This stands as the definitive port footprint of the hyper-powered export machine that China has become.

To absorb this surging growth, port infrastructure was entirely re-engineered, progressively eclipsing the legacy intermediary role historically played by Hong Kong, to the benefit of Shenzhen flanking the border of the autonomous territory. The most extraordinary maritime engineering development remains the offshore deepwater island-port of Yangshan, custom-built to anchor the mega-hubs of Shanghai; nevertheless, the absolute entirety of the coastline's gateways was transformed to process containerized flows, metallurgical exports (115 Mt), automotive shipments (8.3 million vehicles exported), and colossal raw material imports.

Illustrating this sub-continental resource dependency, inbound commodities across 2024 represented: 503 million tonnes (Mt) of crude oil, 421 Mt of coal, 80 Mt of LNG, 35 Mt of LPG, 1.219 billion tonnes of iron ore, 159 Mt of bauxite, 38 Mt of nickel ore, 105 Mt of soybeans, 11 Mt of wheat

In 2025, the Chinese port infrastructure system processed a monumental total of 18.340 billion tonnes of freight, including 5.7 billion tonnes exchanged with international markets. Consequently, through its aggressive export machinery, China generates a formidable economic valuation, logging \$3,770 billion in exports against \$2,580 billion in imports, locking in a colossal annual trade surplus of \$1,200 billion.

This represents the positive face of the Chinese macro-economy; its negative face, however, is heavily fractured by severe domestic bottlenecks, including a prolonged real estate crisis, weak domestic consumer demand, and a structural employment framework heavily penalizing younger generations. These domestic challenges are numerous and can solely be sustained by the high-powered machine sucking in global wealth through a hyper-expanded foreign trade apparatus, emulating a pure form of contemporary neo-mercantilism (maximizing outbound exports while minimizing inbound imports).

This unmatched economic performance is heavily fueled by extensive state-backed dumping practices. Consequently, international trade partners continuously denounce Beijing's unfair competition workflows, while paradoxically maneuvering to sell their goods within the highly promising Chinese domestic consumer market. In 2016, pursuant to WTO statutory rules, China was theoretically scheduled to automatically graduate to formal Market Economy Status. However, the United States resoundingly refused to accord this status, pointing to the extreme level of state interventionism and public subsidies; European diplomats timidly backed Washington's veto, and Beijing attempted to legally challenge the blockage before the WTO prior to permanently abandoning the litigation in 2019.

This friction escalated as the United States entered a phase of structural macroeconomic schizophrenia: on one hand, massive imports of cheap Chinese goods directly benefited the purchasing power of American households; on the other, the corresponding working-class electorates voted twice to elevate Donald Trump to the presidency on a platform resoundingly pledging to dismantle free trade, branding China as the premier economic predator of the nation.

Consequently, the first Trump administration (2017–2020) engaged in successive waves of commercial sanctions materialized by the aggressive raising of customs tariff barriers. At that historical juncture, China supplied half of the entire containerized import traffic entering the United States. In practice, by the 2019 baseline, these tariff lines successfully reduced Chinese laden container flows from 14 million down to 13 million TEUs, a contraction that immediately profited emerging alternatives across Southeast Asia and Mexico.

At that historical juncture, China supplied half of the entire containerized import traffic entering the United States. In practice, by the 2019 baseline, these tariff lines successfully reduced Chinese laden container flows from 14 million down to 13 million TEUs, a contraction that immediately profited emerging alternatives across Southeast Asia and Mexico. However, in 2020, the COVID-19 public health crisis placed this confrontation on pause, subsequently shaking the country when it was heavily struck by the late waves of the pandemic in 2022. The hyper-growth of the 2000s is henceforth part of a distant past, and the sustained growth rates of the 2010s appear increasingly difficult to achieve; yet, for the 2020s, Beijing continuously places its confidence in its foreign trade apparatus.

Everything would proceed smoothly if the re-election of Donald Trump did not severely disrupt the established order of things. In 2025, the new Trump administration engaged its aggressive customs policy, which rapidly degenerated into a full-scale commercial war with Beijing and led to a transactional "Trumpian deal" (enforcing a 30% tariff on Chinese goods against a 10% retaliatory tariff on American products). The immediate macroeconomic result materializes as a sharp contraction in Chinese exports routed toward the United States (a -30% drop in financial value), dynamically compensated by a higher volume of Chinese containerized freight injected into the rest of the world, logging a +10% surge in outbound flows toward Western Europe.

The Geopolitics of Maritime Trade Lanes: The Malacca Dilemma

Within a strictly geostrategic reading of global trade lanes, the premier unassailable evidence resides in the paramount importance of the Malacca Strait choke point. The strait operated initially as a major commercial and maritime crossroads before the European colonial footprint transformed it into a highly weaponized strategic theater. Anchored at Singapore, this "Gateway to the Far East" was isolated by Japanese shipping networks during the 1970s as an exceptionally sensitive passage, initially for reasons of navigational safety and subsequently for seaborne security face to rampant Indonesian piracy.

China, adopting a vastly more geostrategic reading of its supply chains, rapidly realized that its international maritime trade—and explicitly its vital raw material and energy imports—remained structurally dependent on this narrow maritime corridor. This vulnerability was permanently crystallized in 2003 by President Hu Jintao, who coined the famous concept of the "Malacca Dilemma".

In the event of a conventional or asymmetric conflict, the Singapore passage operates literally as an existential point of pressure clamped directly onto China's logistical juggetline. Engineering a hypothetical canal cutting through the Thai Isthmus of Kra to bypass maritime congestion would comprehensively fail to alter China's extreme structural vulnerability to seaborne imports arriving from the West through a narrow passage¹; an identical constraint plagues alternative shipping transits routed through the deep Indonesian straits (*Sunda and Lombok*).

The underlying geography remains unyielding—most distinctively as the Pacific range exclusively feeds the Middle Kingdom with American agricultural grains and shale gas, alongside Australian coal and iron ore []. These are commodity streams that would, in any event, be instantaneously subjected to a strict, total embargo in the scenario of a hot Sino-American military conflict. The geopolitical reality proves that maritime straits forfeit their structural importance if the transiting commodities are themselves weaponized as geopolitical assets. Consequently, seeking to directly control the Panama Canal holds little value when the absolute bulk of its transit traffic remains tightly bound to the bilateral economic macro-exchanges executed between the United States and China.

In March 2026, the targeted strikes launched by the US-Israeli alliance against Iran triggered a complete standstill of maritime traffic throughout the Strait of Hormuz. China found itself abruptly entangled within the volatile maelstrom of Middle Eastern geopolitics as a primary, systemic buyer of energy commodities from both the Persian Gulf monarchies and Iran, anxiously hoping for the swiftest possible de-escalation of the conflict.

Beijing fundamentally wagers on global economic globalization to sustain its proprietary macro-prosperity, a strategic positioning that long rendered it relatively reserved regarding distant geostrategic entanglements. Within the theater of the Yemeni crisis, a striking operational dualism emerged: while COSCO's mega-container ships systematically route around Africa via the Cape of Good Hope, Chinese dry bulk carriers and state-backed oil tankers continuously navigate the Red Sea, explicitly broadcasting their Chinese nationality over AIS tracks to avoid being targeted by Houthi drone strikes. Concurrently, small-scale independent Chinese refiners (*teapots*) aggressively purchase the discounted Russian crude oil henceforth strictly barred from Western European markets, whereas China's premier state-owned energy and shipping conglomerates rigidly keep their distance to avoid secondary Western sanctions.

Over the past decade, Beijing successfully masked the geostrategic vulnerabilities of its trade routes behind a highly efficient conceptual master-stroke, precisely because every global actor can project into it whatever narrative they desire. Baptized under the vague, flexible vocabulary of the "Belt and Road Initiative"—originally formulated within a terrestrial transcontinental perspective in Kazakhstan by

¹ Moving along this path, China constructed in 2009 a dual oil and gas pipeline infrastructure connecting Myanmar (Burma) to the Chinese inland province of Yunnan, custom-engineered to directly import offshore Burmese natural gas extractions alongside Middle Eastern and African crude oil.

President Xi Jinping in 2013—the New Silk Roads have transitioned into a sweeping, all-encompassing State policy.

From that historical baseline, China's worldwide infrastructure deployment has been systematically read through heavily weaponized geopolitical lenses. On one side, Beijing claims it operates purely as an infrastructure development partner under a multilateral, win-win framework tailored to feed its domestic civil engineering and construction giants; on the other side, Western analysts relentlessly lecture on China's shifting imperialist emprise over the planet, confusingly bundling together a single railway line in Ethiopia, a new gateway port in Kenya, deep-water construction zones across West Africa, the absolute corporate control over the Port of Piraeus, and a minor terminal concession in Hamburg.

In raw operational reality, the physical data of the "Chinese Mapping" frequently shatters these sensationalist theories. Inside Pakistani Balochistan, the deepwater Port of Gwadar (2013) —built and managed under Chinese public capital—remains entirely useless for international commercial merchant shipping, serving solely to project the political illusion of a direct logistics corridor leading to Xinjiang. Symmetrically, the custom-engineered port of Hambantota remains chronically underutilized, trapping Sri Lanka within a devastating sovereign debt crisis—a visible warning that forcefully prompted Tanzania to pull back from a symmetric Chinese mega-port blueprint.

Furthermore, Indian diplomatic and financial pressure successfully forced Bangladesh to permanently reject a major Chinese port project, while in Algeria, the strategic mega-port development of Cherchell² remains deeply paralyzed and poorly engaged. Symmetrically, the new deepwater gateway of Chancay in Peru—extensively dramatized by Western analysts as the ultimate spearhead of Chinese naval emprise over Latin America—increasingly functions in 2026 as a commercial "white elephant" rather than an actionable geostrategic asset. It remains vastly simpler for contemporary media to disserte over a newly poured concrete quay than to analyze the quiet, massive macroeconomic growth of COFCO capturing the agricultural trading markets of Brazil and Argentina, or the unassailable emprise of Chinalco over the extraction of critical raw materials and bauxite grids in Guinea.

Consequently, the standard geopolitical reading of China's acquisitions across global ports stems overwhelmingly from journalistic sensationalism. The superficial mapping of corporate shares conceals the authentic, existential threat defining the contemporary era: the "Made in China 2025" master plan—specifically the massive upward migration in technology and value-added industrial tiers achieved by Chinese manufacturing. Global ocean liner pathways and container handling quays do not inherently command intrinsic strategic or military value. Tracing the corporate participation maps of COSCO, China Merchants, or the private Hong Kong-based port operator HPH is akin to staring at a splinter in one's eye while ignoring a forest of beams.

The absolute proof of this corporate disconnect erupted on the global stage when Beijing discovered the sudden, total sale of HPH to the American asset management giant BlackRock and the shipping colossus MSC concurrently at the exact same time as the rest of the world. Certainly, since the closing of that transaction, an intensely vexed Beijing has scrambled to demand a retroactive reallocation of terminal shares for COSCO, while venting its geopolitical frustration in Panama through the forced termination of legacy Houthi concessions; yet, these remain business-as-usual, banal corporate battles face to the authentic, ultra-complex modern geopolitics currently waged between the United States, Europe, and Russia.

The New Silk Roads alongside the international expansions executed by Chinese state conglomerates participate, at their measured scale, to the architectures of the "*New China*". This Middle Kingdom operates concurrently as an economic superpower demanding unrestricted free trade to feed its aggressive neo-mercantilism, and as a pragmatic political superpower weaving international partnerships along the fluid lines of raw geoeconomic opportunity. However, the peaceful, trade-oriented rhetoric continuously projected by Beijing toward the Global South comprehensively fails to mask the highly aggressive, martial posturing it unyieldingly deploys across its immediate maritime vicinity.

² Concurrently, any rigorous mapping must note the marked Chinese absence across major Moroccan port expansions—specifically Tanger Med and Nador West Med—as well as within the projected developmental master plan for the Libyan deepwater gateway of Misrata.

Regional Conflictuality and the Stranglehold of Near Seas

As a newly ascended global superpower, China concurrently maintains and cultivates its proprietary "regional conflictuality." Western Europe inherently detests conflict, yet operates under the permanent impression of being relentlessly pulled back into it (across the Balkans, the Caucasus, Ukraine, the Middle East, and Iran). Symmetrically, Donald Trump's United States—either through transactional rhetoric (targeting Panama, Canada, and Greenland) or via direct actions (intervening in Venezuela, and potentially Cuba)—is aggressively reanimating historical theaters of tension across the Americas. For Beijing, however, conflictuality resides almost inside the structural DNA of the People's Republic.

Throughout the South China Sea, Beijing claims absolute sovereignty over the near-totality of the maritime expanse. Its sweeping "Nine-Dash Line" (commonly nicknamed the "*Cow's Tongue*" due to its geometric footprint) encloses the contested Paracel Islands and underwrites a powerful, militarized force presence across the Spratly Islands.

In raw operational reality, no regional neighbor disposes of the physical capability to engage in a hot conventional conflict with the Chinese armed forces, as local Southeast Asian economies remain deeply, structurally intertwined with Beijing's macroeconomic matrix. There remains for them a profound, underlying nationalistic defiance during active naval incidents on the water, systematically driving tactical security alignments with Tokyo.

The paramount, overarching geopolitical danger plaguing the region remains the permanent specter of a forced, military takeover of Taiwan—the historical refuge of the *Kuomintang* that has successfully converted into a vibrant, high-tech democracy and a macroeconomic juggernaut. While the hypothesis of an imminent war over Taiwan remains debated, its immediate consequence would expand far past the mere localized disruption of shipping trade lanes: it would trigger a global, extreme-intensity crisis.

This déflagration would instantaneously mandate the direct military involvement of the United States, alongside the frontline engagement of Japan and South Korea, while forcing a dramatic diplomatic positioning across Southeast Asia and Western Europe (triggering comprehensive, crushing anti-Chinese sanctions packages). This Asian conflagration would operate on a completely different macroeconomic and geostrategic scale than the war in Ukraine.

For Beijing, vastly more critical than the physical closing of the Malacca, Hormuz, or Panama Canals, it would directly raise the existential question of its global international source markets and raw material supply grids (abruptly severing loops with Australia, Indonesia, Brazil, Argentina, and the Persian Gulf).

Consequently, multiple fundamental questions must be formulated to serene the contemporary era: Is constructing academic reflections over global maritime trade routes in times of peace genuinely useful? Does the geopolitics of shipping lanes override the deep geopolitics of the commodities themselves? Do sensitive maritime choke points matter more to Beijing than the absolute security of its initial extraction supply sources? Is the energy deal signed with Russia structurally scaled to satisfy the titanesque consumption requirements of the Chinese industrial machine? What is the actual, verified value of the Global South alignment when tested by a total conflict pitting China against the Western blocs regarding raw resource logistics? Does the omnipresence of the *Made in China* trademark operate as a strategic vulnerability for Europe and the United States, or does it penalize China itself? Can the Western world comprehensively bypass China as a manufacturing supplier? Symmetrically, can Beijing structurally survive without Western consumer markets? What is the actual utility of managing a giant merchant fleet and owning port terminal concessions across the planet if Beijing enters into a total systemic conflict with the West? What an immense web of questions! The geopolitical reality is that mainland China does not operate as a fragile petro-dictatorship emulating Russia; it stands as an exceptionally sophisticated, complex economy that has vastly better horizons to pursue within the hyper-integrated networks of globalized trade, rather than sinking its future into the military blunders and structural wreckage of a forced annexation of Taiwan.

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