Sea power as a dominant paradigm: the rise of China’s new strategic identity

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ABSTRACT

Background: The current body of literature on China’s maritime expansion has, on most occasions, approached this phenomenon from the perspective of realism and materialistic interpretations. However, seminal works accomplished by authors such as Ross or Heginbotham show that realist approaches cannot entirely account for China’s quest for a sea power identity. It is thus surprising that relatively little attention was paid to the role of strategic identity in China’s desire to change its strategic paradigm. Purpose: Drawing from the works of Wendt and other constructivists on identity, as well as from the literature on strategic culture, this article attempts to show how and why a continental power, in this instance China, would seek to morph into a sea power and come to view sea power as a dominant strategic paradigm. Main Argument: In order to do so, the argumentation follows three steps. First, I examine earlier historical accounts of sea power being actively promoted as a dominant paradigm. Second, I consider China’s characteristics as a continental power. Third, I offer a depiction of the processed change of China’s strategic identity. Conclusion: As a conclusion, this article unveils several implications. In particular, it insists on how sea power as an identity can become a nexus of contention between an established sea power and a continental power seeking to become a sea power, transcending the traditional opposition of sea power and continental power. The conclusion also presents several caveats as starting points for future researches.

1. Introduction

The unabated rise of China’s navy was accompanied by a myriad of research and academic works devoted to this phenomenon. China, long considered a continental power, is now on the march to become a sea power of the first order. Over the past three decades, the People’s Liberation Army Navy (subsequently referred to as “the PLAN” or “Chinese navy”) grew in numbers, became increasingly modern and professional, and expanded its scope of action. Although no official service-by-service division of the defense budget was made public, the navy has indubitably received an increasing share of defense investments.¹

1 Li and Erickson, “Demystifying China’s Defence Spending,” 26.
China’s power is thus changing. But this change is not only material, it is also one of perceptions and ideas. What we are witnessing today is a conscious effort to change a certain strategic identity, the passage from a continental identity to a maritime identity, or to say the very least, to a hybridization of the two. This article seeks to analyze why China is trying to change its strategic identity.

A tremendous amount of the current literature has understandably focused on China’s naval hardware, its emergent doctrine, and what this entails for the current dominating sea power of this age, the United States. Comparative, the existing literature on this identity modification is relatively small. One of the best accounts to date on how Chinese academics and military leaders perceive their countries to be a continental power or a sea power in-being is given by Erickson and Goldstein. The authors persuasively present the domestic debate in which China has engaged itself, showing how a growing number of sea power proponents have argued in favor of an ocean-going navy while its continentalist faction warns of an overestimation of the importance of sea power. However, the authors refrain from producing any personal assessment over this matter, stating that “because Chinese maritime development is a phenomenon of great complexity, […] readers are invited to draw their own conclusions.”

On the other hand, current literature emanating from international politics has dealt extensively with the interaction between state identity and the international scene but rarely in connection to the subject of sea power and continental power. As mentioned above, such discussions on sea power and continental power have more often than not been associated with realism and other materialist interpretations. Understandably, such issues are, on the surface, best suited to fit concepts like the balance of power and threat perceptions. However, there are several loopholes to a purely realist interpretation of changes in strategic identity. China is a case in point. First, the extensive development of the Chinese navy from the 1980s until today took place in a relatively threat-free environment, which, for China, is in stark contrast with the 1950s and 1960s. While it is true that China’s economic takeoff under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping and China’s increased insertion within the global economy provided with both a financial basis and a security objective (i.e., the protection of its seaborne trade) upon which naval expansion could be legitimized, China’s choice to resort to this option was by no means natural. For instance, what pushed China to devote an increasing part of its expanded budget to the navy rather than to civilian investment or even to defense expenditures for the army, the armed service where it enjoyed a considerable comparative advantage? Similarly, what prevented China from “free-riding” the security benefits provided by the U.S. navy instead of building a costly navy of its own? Last, some realist scholars insist on the importance of the liberation of Taiwan in explaining the rise of the PLAN. However, up to very recently, China’s naval buildup devoted little attention to amphibious capabilities that would be required for an invasion of

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2 The amount of work done on the Chinese navy over the last two decades is properly overwhelming. For the most prominent of these works, see Cole, *The Great Wall at Sea*; and Holmes and Yoshihara, *Red Star over the Pacific.*
3 Erickson and Goldstein, *China Goes to Sea.*
4 Ibid., xxx.
5 Ross offers an insightful critique of realism-framed reasons driving China’s naval expansion, and notably its decision to acquire an aircraft carrier (“China’s Naval Nationalism,” 80–81).
Taiwan. Thus, these factors alone cannot explain why China is attempting to become a sea power. At the same time, certain key ideas of constructivism provide with interesting responses to these questions. Identity construction and state identity came to the fore of international relations studies with the advent of constructivism in the 1980s. Drawing from an already rich literature on identity in sociology, psychology, and many other disciplines, seminal works such as those of Alexander Wendt argued that the identity of states mattered a great deal more in international relations than what realists and liberals of the past decades were led to believe. In particular, state identity gave birth to a stream of literature regarding how and why it is constructed (and deconstructed). In the course of this work’s argument, it is necessary to understand what we mean by it. Wendt defines social identities [of states] (it is understood that several social identities can coexist) as “sets of meanings that [a state] attributes to itself while taking the perspective of others, that is, as a social object.” It is beyond the scope of this research to dwell on the vast theoretical debate brought by Wendt and consorts, but the understanding of key cognitive concepts and their creative mechanisms cannot be left aside. Thus, if we look through Wendt’s theoretical lenses, in the framework of this research, it can be posited that continental powers seek to metamorphose into maritime powers either endogenously or because social interactions with self-identifying maritime states have modified the perception they have of sea power and the interests that derive from it. The nature of the strategic (or power) identity adopted by a state can derive from its social interactions as well as an endogenous process of strategic perception. The accepted or pursued identity parallels the adoption of a certain set of practices and behaviors regarding military affairs. This concept of political-military culture, akin to the notion of strategic culture, represents a “subset of the larger historical-political culture that encompasses orientations related to defense, security, the military as an institution, and the use of force in international affairs.” For instance, in the case of continental powers, the overwhelming cultural prevalence of the army over the navy within the state organization creates an endogenous set of norms, rules, and behaviors that can reverberate on a state’s conception of military identity, and defense policies stemming from it. Hence, it is to be noted that strategic culture adds a second level of analysis on how strategic identity, or a state’s conception and perception of its own strategic orientations and characteristics, particularly in how it differs from other states, results in a higher degree of influence on the way states might interact with each other. For instance, a state prone to the use of military force in international disputes (strategic culture) might be viewed by another state with either indifference or great concern depending on whether the aforementioned turbulent state is a sea power or a continental power. And while strategic culture and strategic identity usually come hand in hand, to know whether strategic identity begets strategic culture

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6Lim, China’s Naval Power, 97–101.
7See, for example, Wendt, “Anarchy is What States Make of It,” 391–425.
8Wendt, “Collective Identity Formation,” 385. Wendt himself, drawing his theoretical approach from other fields of studies, relies on the conceptual approach developed by McCall and Simmons, in McCall and Simmons, Identities and Interactions, 61–100.
9Regarding the foreign influence of identity construction and sea power, it is interesting to highlight the cognitive impact of Mahan’s The Influence of Sea Power Upon History on foreign audiences, and particularly its diffusion among Chinese intelligentsia and military planners. This will be dealt in greater details in Section 2 of this paper.
10Berger, Cultures of Antimilitarism, 15.
or strategic culture begets strategic identity remains unclear. However, it is safe to surmise that both result from changes in the leadership’s perception of what corresponds best to the socially defined national interests (top–down) and/or similar grassroots changes emanating from organizations such as think tanks or academic institutions affiliated to the military and making their ways to the top (bottom–up).

However, it is not enough for a state to be willing to adopt another strategic identity. The state has to perform, it has to convincingly mold its “self” and project this new image of the self onto the “other,” its audience. For instance, this identity projection can be carried by narratives and historical figures, and it can be argued that historical narratives and remembrance processes are made by and of political choices. Mythical or quasi-mythical figures, the pathos and popular passions can help states attempt to radically change their self in the view of their audience. Undoubtedly, figures and events can serve political purposes, and sometimes are the product of political purposes. In the case of strategic identity, states can also choose to adapt their security discourse accordingly. In an influential work, Ole Waever describes the securitization process of the political discourse. The essence of the securitization of certain issues is to foster policy support and, for example, budgetary efforts, in order to achieve specific policy objectives. By encompassing new domains into its security speech, a state can signal to its audience that its national interests have evolved and expanded. This process is vital to any naval service and sea power ambitions, for the public expenses generated by naval procurements are generally high. Hadn’t Samuel Huntington himself, building on his experience on civil-military relations, warned the U.S. navy right after the World War II, that such service needed a convincing mission to endure? Last, the state also has to be aware that any discrepancy existing between its speech and actions can be screened by the audience as structural failures to implement the desired identity or worse, as an attempt to manipulate the said audience.

Whether intentional or not, changes in a country’s strategic identity are not benign, particularly if they rest on historical interpretations. For example, the (often nefarious) role of historical narratives and myths used in the process of identity construction on diplomatic relations has been covered by scholars such as He Yinan. The author argues:

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\text{the fundamental cause of international political conflict over history lies in the intentional manipulation of history by ruling elites, or national mythmaking, for instrumental purposes. (\ldots) Elites use these highly symbolic myths to justify national security policy or address domestic political concerns such as regime legitimacy, social mobilization needs, and factional and organizational interests. These myths tend to lead different countries to interpret the same historical events with great discrepancy. Elites may shelve their historiographical differences with another country for fear of damaging immediate economic}\]

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11On the theoretical debate regarding strategic culture broadly defined, see Johnston, *Cultural Realism*; and Gray, “Strategic Culture as Context,” 49–69. The concept of “strategic identity” is not sustained by any prior literature that the author is aware of. As developed in this section, it is defined as the identity of a state that is built upon strategic concerns and issues.

12Vandersluis, *The State and Identity Construction in International Relations*, 207.

13Cohen, *History in Three Keys*, 213.

14Waever, “Securitization and Desecuritization,” 46–86.

15Huntington wrote: “if a service does not possess a well-defined strategic concept, the public and political leaders will be confused as to the role of the service (\ldots) and apathetic or hostile to the claims made by the service on the resources of society,” and also: “what function do you perform which obligates society to assume responsibility for your maintenance?” (Huntington, “National Policy,” 483–484).
and political interests but tend to exploit the political benefit of these differences when they feel a strong sense of insecurity in domestic politics.\textsuperscript{16}

This extract is worth quoting at some length, since it concisely provides the means of analysis upon which the argumentation regarding mythmaking, strategic identity and political speech can be constructed.\textsuperscript{17} The implications of changes in strategic identity, particularly regarding the transition from continental to maritime power, will be developed in the fifth section of this article.

Hence, a state’s identity on the international scene emerges from a conscious and unconscious process of interwoven social interactions. This section sought to briefly cover how changes in strategic identity come about and how this process can be implemented by states. But what is of interest in the framework of this research is the premeditated nature of the strategic identity construction in order to assert a certain image of the “self” in the international arena. Why would a state willingly decide to change its continental identity into a maritime one?

In order to shed some light on these important questions, the present article is organized as follows. In \textit{Sections 2}, I give a brief overview of sea power as a dominant strategic paradigm and its power of diffusion. \textit{Section 3} examines some of China’s characteristics as a continental power. In \textit{Section 4}, I turn to the metamorphosis that is occurring in China’s strategic identity via the analysis of two phenomena, the use of Zheng He in the discursive practices of the Chinese leaders, and the growing interest of the Chinese intelligentsia in sea power. \textit{Section 5} explores the implications of this process, showing in particular how sea power can become a nexus for confrontation. The purpose of the conclusion is twofold: it presents some caveats to this research, notably regarding the nature and consequences of the coexistence of more than one strategic paradigm in a state’s identity. It also seeks to provide grounds upon which to engage future discussions.

\section{2. Sea power as a dominant cultural paradigm of identity}

The preceding section has sought to explain concisely how notions of state identity, strategic culture and norms intervene in the process of change in state identity. But one has yet to know why a state (in this case, China) is attempting to change from continental power to sea power. The hypothesis formulated in this work is that sea power can not only be conceived of as a set of hardware and military doctrine, as it is usually the case, but also as a strategic identity and a strategic culture\textsuperscript{18}: an identity because it results from intertwined perceptions between how the state sees itself with how it wants to be perceived but also how the other perceives it, and a culture because the referring identity produces a strategically oriented set of values, norms, institutional behaviors, and even artifacts (e.g., warships).\textsuperscript{19} Moreover, we argue that sea power has

\textsuperscript{16}He, “Remembering and Forgetting the War,” 44–45.

\textsuperscript{17}Of note, not all scholars in international relations agree on the scale of the impact caused by mythmaking. A more nuanced approach is given by Lind, \textit{Sorry States: Apologies in International Politics}. Lind shows that such factors are indeed important, but concerns closer to realism are preponderant.

\textsuperscript{18}For a broad definition of the concept of “culture” in sociological terms, see Hoult, \textit{Dictionary of Modern Sociology}, 93.

\textsuperscript{19}Berger, \textit{Cultures of Antimilitarism}, 1–7. Also, Levy and Thompson talk of sea power as a “strategic orientation,” which, according to them, transcend geographic determinism (Blagden, Levy and Thompson, “Correspondence,” 197–202).
become a relatively dominant paradigm among strategic identities. As with norms, we can expect that paradigms are formed and diffused in certain ways.\textsuperscript{20} By imitations, a state can seek to emulate a certain strategic identity because experience, interactions, and cognitive processes to be found at the domestic level modified its perception of this certain strategic identity. But because sea power as a dominant strategic culture and identity, unlike other norms such as human rights, cannot be separated from important materialist constrains, the ability of actors to abide or react to this culture heavily depends on their material capabilities. In other words, material constrains would severely limit the diffusion of the paradigm, and thus the perceived utility and desire to undergo identity change. This is reflected by the fact that great powers that have made a bid at sea power status are rather rare in history.\textsuperscript{21} We argue that China is now attempting to change its identity because it now has the possibility to respond to it since it faces no direct land threats, and has access to increased budgetary resources, and because it perceives the advantages of the dominant identity. It should also be noted that the scope of this article does not include discussions on the rights and wrongs of sea power proponents and opponents. The crux of the matter is to show how and why sea power identity has become relevant enough for political leaders to desire a transition from continental power to sea power.

Showing that sea power, compared to any other type of strategic identity and culture, has become dominant is not an easy task. Nonetheless, the cognitive dichotomy between land power and sea power is rather ancient and supported by many evidences. The Greeks had identified political structures relying on maritime power as “thalassocracies,” and Herodotus had been an early advocate of Greek thalassocracy against rival Phoenicians.\textsuperscript{22} Some of their political leaders had already perceived sea power as being a superior form of military power. In the midst of the Peloponnesian War, Alcibiades had exhorted the courage of his fellow Athenians by exhaling the virtues of the superior Athenian navy over that of Sparta’s allies.\textsuperscript{23} But is it to say that the idea that sea power was recognized from an early age as a dominant form of power? History would rather suggest that sea power as a dominant paradigm was locally and timely limited and was by no means universal.\textsuperscript{24} Furthermore, the very idea of continental power itself was apparently equally slow to develop simply because land armies remained, at least until the age of sail, the only obvious identity available to political units in their strategic considerations. It would appear that the sea power paradigm, while now recognized as inherently correlated with great power status, did not gain a more universal momentum until the nineteenth century. Concomitantly, only when sea power began to enjoy a certain degree of recognition as a strategic identity in itself with the advent of powerful maritime states such as Portugal, Holland, and Britain, did opposition between sea power and continental power become strategically relevant on a wider basis. The idea of sea power as a dominant strategic identity is most associated with Alfred T. Mahan’s writings, but by 1890, the strength of Mahan’s work was not so much in the originality of his argument than the forcefulness of the said argument and how sea power began to

\textsuperscript{20}Finnemore and Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics,” 903, 906.
\textsuperscript{21}Modelski and Thompson, Seapower in Global Politics, 27–49.
\textsuperscript{22}Momigliano, “Sea-Power in Greek Thought,” 1–7.
\textsuperscript{23}Starr, The Influence of Sea Power, 29–48.
\textsuperscript{24}Tucker, Naval Warfare: An International Encyclopedia, xxxv.
be recognized as a means of achieving great power status of paramount importance.\(^{25}\) Admittedly, the ideas presented by Mahan found a strong echo in the political leaders of his homeland, and also abroad. Theodore Roosevelt in the United States, or Kaiser Wilhelm in Germany were renown proponents of sea power. In a letter to a friend, the Kaiser wrote: “I am just now not reading but devouring Captain Mahan’s book and am trying to learn it by heart. It is a first-class book and classical on all points.”\(^{26}\) But Mahan was not the sole prophet of sea power. Indeed, from the beginning of the nineteenth century, several authors had produced treaties on sea power quite independently from one another. In Italy, Giulio Rocco wrote his *Reflections on Sea Power* as early as 1814.\(^{27}\) In France, home of the Jeune Ecole (“the Young School”) and several naval authors abundantly quoted by Mahan himself, authors such as Joseph Thomassy explored the concept of sea power. \(^{28}\) In England, Admiral Philip Colomb presented ideas not dissimilar to that of Mahan.\(^{29}\) In Germany, Admiral Tirpitz was said to have reached the same conclusions as Mahan before reading *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History*.\(^{30}\) The imperialist race to colonies indubitably contributed to promote sea power as a strategic paradigm beyond Europe. Meiji Japan radically changed the way Japanese statesmen viewed the command of the seas.\(^{31}\) Imperial China, while facing many obstacles, also sought to break away from its traditional continentalist views of security. The military modernization brought about by the Self-Strengthening Movement created favorable conditions, and the imperial government initiated the development of a navy which, until the Sino-Japanese War, could be considered as the most powerful of the region.\(^{32}\) In other words, the perceived benefits and advantages of sea power had gained speed in isolated places and occasions, and the sea power paradigm spread at an astounding rate before the start of the World War I. The prewar naval arms race had engulfed countries from Europe, Asia, and the Americas and the perceived utility of large navies could no longer be neglected, as epitomized by the Washington Naval Conference of 1922.

However, sea power as a dominant strategic identity and culture continued to be challenged. First, the sea power fever of the 19\(^{th}\) century continued well into the twentieth century, with academics extensively writing on sea power and types of dominance. Following Mahan, a stream of scholars and officers continued to argue over the merits and demerits of sea power and land power. Corbett, Castex and Spykman have, in one way or the other, attempted to show how sea power was an unavoidable means to achieve great power status.\(^{33}\) But they often met with intellectual opponents such as MacKinder, Kennedy, and Mearsheimer to name but the most

\(^{25}\) Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power*; and its many commentators.

\(^{26}\) Rohl, *Wilhelm II: The Kaiser’s Personal Monarchy*, 1003.

\(^{27}\) Rocco, *Riflessioni sul Potere Marittima*.

\(^{28}\) Thomassy, *De la Puissance Maritime*.

\(^{29}\) Colomb, *Naval Warfare*.

\(^{30}\) Von Tirpitz, *My Memoirs*.

\(^{31}\) See, for example, Shibasaki, “Rivalry between Tokutomi Soho and Imperial Japanese Navy,” 1–20. Also, Geoffrey Till refers to Akiyama Saneyuki and Sato Tetsutarō as promoters of “Mahanian” ideals in Japan (Till, *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty First Century*, 54).

\(^{32}\) See, for example, Wright, *The Chinese Steam Navy*; Swanson, *Eighth Voyage of the Dragon*; and Rawlinson, *China’s Struggle for Naval Development*.

\(^{33}\) See Corbett, *Some Principles*, Castex, *Théories stratégiques*, Spykman, *America’s Strategy*. 
famous, who emphasized that the nexus of great power politics resided in land power.  
Second, the usefulness of sea power as a strategic paradigm was also weakened by the 
advent of nuclear weaponry. In many military circles, it was thought that navies had 
outlived their purpose as a useful military force because nuclear power had replaced the 
need for conventional forces. This debate was partially resolved by the fusion of nuclear 
deterrence with sea power, and most importantly, the continued relevance of 
conventional power. Scholarly works such as that of Modelski and Thompson 
emphasized that there was a strong correlation existing between sea power and great 
power status. Global leading powers all associated their status to the strength of their 
avies, creating a form of inadvertent cultural hegemony of sea power that was actively 
mimicked by other states whenever they saw a window of opportunity. This phenom-
enon of emulation emphasizes the rise of sea power as the perceived dominant strategic 
paradigm.

3. Continental identity as a dominant paradigm in Chinese history

In an early account of contemporary Chinese sea power, Swanson opened his work as 
follows: “Chinese naval history over the past millennium has been characterized by the 
clash between two great cultural identities: continental, Confucianist China and mar-
time China.” Indeed, ancient and modern Chinese history suggests that maritime 
trade and naval power flourished at various epochs. For instance, sea power was the key 
to decisive riverine battles between feuding warlords of the warring kingdoms, such as 
the Battle of Chibi (赤壁之戰) or the Battle of Jiangxia (江夏之戰). Later on, the Yuan 
dynasty victoriously fought against the Song dynasty over the control of the Han River 
at the Battle of Xiangyang (襄陽之戰) and decisively at the Battle of Yamen (厓門海 
戰). The development of seaborne commerce in East Asia also thrived importantly, 
although governmental efforts in sustaining it were less conspicuous. There were also 
impressive advancements in naval technology, epitomized by such seaborne wonders as 
the treasure ships. During the Ming dynasty, the seven expeditions of Zheng He (鄭 
和) reached lands as far as the eastern coasts of Africa, and even after the disbanding of 
these expeditions, the Ming dynasty retained enough naval power to repel Portuguese 
forces at sea on several occasions one century after.

Yet for all these achievements, what transpired over the ages is a strong tellurocentric 
identity. It appears that at times, Chinese emperors such as Yongle (永樂) were not 
entirely oblivious to the benefits of maritime expansion, but their “policies were often 
thwarted by land-oriented bureaucracies.” Geography, socioeconomic structures of 
the peasantry and the gentry, bureaucratic hurdles and land-based threats played a

34See MacKinder, “The Geographical Pivot,” Kennedy, The Rise and Fall, Mearsheimer, Tragedy.
35The exponential growth of nuclear strategists in the early Cold War era signaled the rise of nuclear power as the 
supreme element to strategic equation at that time. In this sense, it is ironic that Bernard Brodie, famed strategist on 
nuclear issues and deterrence, was a naval strategist in his earlier years.
36See, for example, Gorshkov, The Sea Power of the State; and Barjot, Vers la Marine de L’Age Atomique.
37Models and Thompson, Seapower in Global Politics, 12.
38Swanson, Eighth Voyage of the Dragon, 1.
39Deng, Chinese Maritime Activities, 107.
40Deng, Maritime Sector, Institutions, and Sea Power, 163–164.
41See above 38.
considerable role in shaping China’s continental identity.\(^{42}\) It would be going too far to suggest that China was a land power by design, but the expansion of its maritime identity was hampered by numerous factors. This led Swanson to conclude that “frequent suppression of the maritime spirit by imperial governments stifled Chinese acquisitiveness and seafaring ingenuity. Instead of developing more scientifically, China’s ocean commerce and naval spirit were perpetuated through illegal and primitive systems.”\(^{43}\) So much so that after the Sino-Japanese War of 1895 and Imperial China’s last fruitless effort toward naval modernization, China was durably deprived of any significant sea power.\(^{44}\)

The victory of the CCP in 1949 initially did little to change China’s strategic identity. On the contrary, Mao Zedong’s military campaign against the Kuomintang during the civil war heavily relied on popular support, guerilla warfare on a massive scale, all the while leaving the command of the seas (and rivers) to its opponents.\(^{45}\) Mao genuinely believed that the strategic power of China rested with its people, an intrinsic characteristic of continental power. In a conversation with Khrushchev held in 1958, Mao had insisted that “the size of the population is decisive, as in the past, in deciding the balance of forces,” and that the number of divisions the Soviet Union and China could put on the field should be enough to insure the security of the Communist bloc, to which Khrushchev added that this “corresponded to the point of view [Mao] had expressed earlier at the international conference of fraternal parties in 1957, when Mao had stated that for China the loss of 300 million people, that is, half of the population, would not be a tragedy”.\(^{46}\) Moreover, Mao’s military doctrine of the People’s War took into little or no account the role of sea power. Even when the People’s Republic of China (PRC) started to develop an embryonic navy from the 1950s to the 1970s, Mao’s own continental power-minded warfare doctrine was duplicated for the navy with the concept of People’s Warfare at Sea.\(^{47}\) This being said, Mao and the Chinese leadership were not altogether opposed to the idea of building a navy. In fact, their Soviet allies had impressed upon them the necessity of strong naval forces since the civil war.\(^{48}\) On several occasions, Mao himself was shown to have given some thoughts to the importance of a navy and a robust maritime economy.\(^{49}\) Nonetheless, the continuation of Mao’s continentalist identity throughout his leadership, coupled with the slow-paced evolution of China’s sea power from the 1950s to the 1970s, its economic and industrial weaknesses, and the consequences of the Sino-Soviet split, suggest that the continental strategic identity remained firmly anchored in the mind of the Chinese leadership. The last testimony to Communist China’s continental identity is

\(^{42}\)Ibid., 1–43.
\(^{43}\)Ibid., 53.
\(^{44}\)Sea power assets in China were considerably diminished during the first half the 20th century, but the spirit of navalism remained latent. For example, Sun Yat-sen had argued that “the competition over the control of the Pacific Ocean is a competition for occupying China. Who wins this competition will own the treasury land” (quoted in Ju, China’s Maritime Power and Strategy, xxxi).
\(^{45}\)Westad, Decisive Encounters, 240–243. The first serious attempt made by the CCP at wresting control of the rivers and nearby seas did not start until the very end of the war (Hiramatsu, Yomigaeru Chugoku Kaigun, 12–25).
\(^{46}\)Khrushchev, Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev, 458–459.
\(^{47}\)Swanson, Eighth Voyage of the Dragon, 207–216.
\(^{48}\)Wilson Center, Record of a Conversation.
\(^{49}\)See, for example, Cole, The Great Wall at Sea; and Hiramatsu, Yomigaeru Chugoku Kaigun. Although Mao did not produce any articulated thoughts on sea power, he was genuinely concerned by the sea power of imperialist (and Soviet) powers, as illustrated by Third Front Movement (see, Naughton, “The Third Front,” 351–386).
to be found in the views expressed by a certain number of contemporary commentators and analysts, regarding this transformation. Continentalist advocates include scholars such as Ye Zicheng, who forcibly argued that “in the current stage we must regard the building of China’s land as the central task and develop land power as the strategic focus, [while] the development of sea power should be limited and should serve and be subordinate to the development of land power”. However, the line of argument developed by contemporary Chinese continentalists has been increasingly challenged by the proponents of a rising strategic paradigm in China.

4. The rise of sea power as a dominant strategic paradigm in China

It has now become a commonplace to state that Chinese sea power is rapidly expanding. A brief look at China’s defense expenditures of the past few decades and the pace of development of the Chinese navy alone serve to indicate that the Chinese leadership has grown increasingly serious about sea power. However, a growing number of ships do not explain why this number is increasing in the first place. A number of works presented several hypotheses explaining the rise of China’s sea power, mostly affiliated to realism, as mentioned in the introduction. This work does not dismiss the importance of these hypotheses. Rather, it seeks to show that overly materialistic reasons such as an outstanding economic growth and the absence of a land threat since the fall of the Soviet Union freed China from the restraints of adopting the tenets of sea power as a strategic identity. As shown by Thompson and Levy, adopting sea power as a dominant strategic paradigm is neither a merely geographic determinism nor entirely motivated by materialistic reasons. It is to subscribe to a certain view of power that has, as argued in the previous section, become a dominant paradigm, and to accept the validity of its merits over its demerits.

4.1. China’s awakening to sea power

The rise of sea power as a strategic paradigm was a slow-paced process. In the previous section, it has been shown that China remained a continental power throughout the Maoist era. The end of the Cultural Revolution and the death of Mao shortly after brought major changes in the way China conceived sea power as a strategic paradigm. Deng Xiaoping’s reforms and China’s economic takeoff finally provided the economic basis upon which the country could develop its navy, but these factors alone were insufficient to explain the rise of China’s navy and its quest for a sea power identity. And while the international situation at times offered apparently valid reasons as to why the leadership might perceive that a strong navy was needed, a closer observation on the long run reveals a certain discrepancy between situational needs and the structural efforts of the PRC to modernize the navy. Furthermore, this does not account for the more recent insistence of the Chinese leadership to assert China’s sea power identity. An additional layer of analysis considering domestic politics is thus required. In this regard, Heginbotham presents an interesting argument: that the navies tend to have

50 Quoted in Erickson and Goldstein, China Goes to Sea, xxiv.
51 Blagden, Levy and Thomson, “Correspondence,” 190–202.
domestic preferences in line with those of liberal political leaders, while army officers tend to bandwagon with what the author calls “integrated nationalists”. In contests for political power, the winning faction prefers to promote military cadres from the service to which they are allied. He consequently argues that this domestic political alliance explains the rise of the Chinese navy in the 1980s. This thought-provoking analysis gives an interesting account on how domestic political factors might influence the rise of a certain service of the armed forces, although one might not go so far as to argue, as Heginbotham seems to imply, that liberal political leaders and navies always go hand in hand. One only needs to remember the case of Wilhelmine Germany prior to WWI, or the Soviet Union under Stalin and Krushchev respectively to understand that this proposition is not entirely satisfactory. Admittedly, the process is far more complex, a complexity that pervades the rise of sea power as a legitimate strategic paradigm from the 1980s in China. After the Cultural Revolution, the political alliance that emerged victoriously from the political struggle was that of the political reformists such as Deng Xiaoping. Of note, Deng’s political alliance with the military apparatus was more transversal than Heginbotham would suggest. If the reformists within the navy did rally Deng, this was not the case for the entire navy. Throughout the Cultural Revolution, a body of high ranking naval officers was tightly linked to the radical faction opposed to Deng’s reformists. During the final contest between Deng Xiaoping and Hua Guofeng, the political support of the navy to one or the other leader even became a point of contention. Furthermore, this alliance also naturally extended to the reformists within the army and other services of the PLA. For the navy, the consequences of the reformists’ victory and their alliance with key reformist military leaders were important. First, this enabled the promotion (or rehabilitation, for some) of navy officers trained in the Soviet Union in the 1950s to key positions in the navy. These officers were educated in the naval academies of the Soviet Union at a time when Soviet naval thought, after a period of promoting a Soviet-styled Young School and subordination of the navy to the army, was steering back toward a more classical Mahanian conception of sea power. While in the China of the 1980s, the Soviet Union was still castigated, such officers, conscious of the lessons taught by the Soviets, often sided with the reformists. For those who had survived the purges, they now found themselves in position to influence China’s strategic thoughts. Liu Huaqing, trained at the Voroshilov naval academy, an advocate of Mahan’s theories, and a supporter of aircraft carrier programs was a case in point. Second, the subsequent downplaying of political works in the rank and files of the navy and the genuine acceptance of technology and doctrinal transformation over ideology and the people’s war doctrine which accompanied the downsizing and the professionalization of the entire PLA provided an opportunity for sea power proponents to express the merits of sea power, although in an oblique way, and never in confrontation with the still powerful army. A form of

52 Heginbotham, “The Fall and Rise of East Asian Navies,” 86–87.
53 Goodman, Deng Xiaoping and the Chinese Revolution, 87–89.
54 Swanson, Eighth Voyage of the Dragon, 237–253.
55 Hiramatsu, Chuugoku, 24–28.
56 Goodman, Deng Xiaoping and the Chinese Revolution, 80.
57 Hiramatsu, Yomigaeru Chuugoku, 40–41, and Swanson, Eighth Voyage of the Dragon, 277.
58 Herrick, Soviet Naval Theory, 233–252.
59 Li, “The Evolution of China’s Naval Strategy,” 123.
navalism, the active promotion of naval policies, seemed to take place. For instance, the navy released a historical account of the navy from its foundation in 1988, showing the merits of the navy. While this book is rather quiet on the role of the Soviets and the importance of their legacy, it also expressed the new missions that the navy could accomplish. Liu Huaqing himself, as commander in chief of the navy, also penned several important articles in the public prints, most likely in an attempt to raise awareness toward maritime issues, to which the navy could contribute. Last, the increased normalization of China’s diplomatic relations opened new perspectives for the navy. The number of naval visits abroad, exchanges with foreign navy officials, and other forms of interactions dramatically increased in the 1980s. While it is difficult to assess precisely the impact of these interactions on China’s strategic thoughts on sea power, one can posit that it may have fostered China’s recognition of sea power as a dominant strategic paradigm.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, two other aspects of China’s identity transition buttress the cognitive changes sought by the Chinese leadership. The first one is the fundamental shift that occurred in the discursive practices and speech acts of the Chinese leadership, particularly under the mandate of Hu Jintao. In the early 2000s, members of the Chinese leadership revived the mythical figure of Zheng He in political discourses as a means to assert China’s newfound maritime identity. The second dynamic is partly related to the first one. It is the spreading of the “philosophy” of sea power, as shown by the growing intellectual production of Chinese military officials and scholars on the subject.

4.2. Zheng He in national mythmaking and maritime identity

By the beginning of the new millennia, the maritime turn of China had been evident for quite some time, and China increasingly saw the need to soothe the threat perception stemming from its naval buildup, and to recreate a Chinese seafaring identity. The emergence of Zheng He in the political discourse must be understood in this context. The Hu Jintao era (2002–2012) was critical in replacing Zheng He as a central figure of China’s maritime identity. Many Chinese officials made statements drawing a parallel between contemporary China and the historical narrative offered by Zheng He. For instance, in 2004, then vice-minister for communication Xu Zuyuan emphasized that “the essence of Zheng’s voyages does not lie in how strong the Chinese navy once was, but in that China adhere[d] to peaceful diplomacy when it was a big power (...) Zheng He’s seven voyages to the West [explain] why a peaceful emergence is the inevitable outcome of the development of Chinese history.” More surprisingly in 2003, President Hu gave an astonishing speech in front of the Australian Parliament in which he stated “the Chinese people have all along cherished amicable feelings about the Australian people. Back in the 1420s, the expeditionary fleets of China’s Ming Dynasty reached Australian shores. For centuries, the Chinese sailed across vast seas and settled down in what they called Southern Land, or today’s Australia. They brought Chinese culture to

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60Yang, Dangdai Zhongguo Haijun.
61See, for example, FBIS Daily Reports, “Liu Huaqing Calls for Building Powerful Navy,” “Navy Commander Liu Huaqing on Maritime Goals,” and “Navy’s Liu Huaqing on Aiding Nation’s Economy.”
62People’s Daily, “China Celebrates Ancient Mariner.”
this land and lived harmoniously with the local people, contributing their proud share to Australia’s economy, society and its thriving pluralistic culture.”63 These two statements are revealing for some reasons. First, Hu Jintao’s historically dubious statement regarding Chinese sailors bringing culture and goods to Australian shores could not have failed to emphasize the mythical nature of China’s seafaring traditions. Historical accuracy did not matter as much as the intended image projection upon the audience. Second, Xu Zuyan’s comment makes a clear reference to the Ming’s “strong Chinese navy” as a conspicuous parallel to the contemporary PLAN, a fleet of growing capabilities and consequent size. Back in 2004, China was already signaling to the world that it intended to develop a large naval power. Furthermore, what mattered, as this official emphasized, was not so much the size of the (future) fleet, but what China would do with it. At this time, the Hu Jintao administration was bending over backward to show that what China actually did “with it” was in line with its peaceful rise.64 Thus, the use of Zheng He was part of a larger communication strategy forged by China and aimed at promoting the vision of peace and development along with the image of a maritime China. Zheng Bijian was one of the key architects of this strategy, and produced a series of influential speeches on the “peaceful rise of China.” In parallel, during his 2005 speech in front of the United Nations General Assembly, Hu Jintao promoted his vision of a “harmonious world,” furthering China’s strategy of political communication. The notion of “harmonious world” also found its echo in China’s maritime vision, with Admiral Wu Shengli, commander in chief of the Chinese navy, stating that the navy should contribute to the establishment of a “harmonious ocean.”65 This change in strategic identity was officially recognized as such when in 2006 Hu Jintao asserted that “China is a maritime power.”66

The reference to Zheng He as a mythical figure in the political speech of Chinese officials for the promotion of China’s maritime identity continued unabated throughout the Hu Jintao era. For instance, the year 2009 proved to be an important test for the peaceful nature of China’s navy and its maritime expansion. China decided to act upon a growing debate regarding the future role of China as a “responsible stakeholder” in world affairs, including military related activities. China decided to dispatch a PLAN squadron off the coasts of Somalia, an act which obviously echoed Zheng He’s voyages to eastern Africa six centuries ago, and was picked on as such by the media. In 2009, Beijing also celebrated the 60th anniversary of both the PRC and the PLAN. At this occasion, the image of Zheng He as promoter of peace and cooperation was also relayed in the Chinese media in such fashion:

Marking the Navy’s 60th anniversary amid an economic slowdown can redeem national pride in the waters where corrupted and occlusive Qing Empire left a history of humiliation for bending to overseas colonists aboard gunboats. (…) During seven voyages by Zheng He (1371–1433), China’s own Christopher Columbus-like navigator, what was then the largest flotilla in the world imposed neither a colonial treaty nor claimed a piece of soil. (…) An increasing presence offshore China’s 18,000-kilometer

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63Sydney Morning Herald, “Full Text.”
64In 2002, the ASEAN and China adopted a “Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea,” temporarily shelving the territorial disputes in the region.
65Xinhua, “China Concludes Celebration of Navy.”
66Quoted from Lim, China’s Naval Power, 2.
mainland coastline might raise concerns among neighbors. However, it is imperative for the world’s fastest-growing economy, which must – despite the global downturn – protect its cargo and awake citizens to its sea power.67

Furthermore, the use of Zheng He grew increasingly correlated with the idea of the rise of a peaceful China, and its interconnectedness with the world. In fact, the year 2009 is still seen by some as a turning point in the renewed tensions between China and the United States.68 In 2010, when maritime territorial disputes in the South China Sea were flaring up after a period of relative calm following the 2002 Code of Conduct, Dai Bingguo asserted again the peaceful nature of China’s rise vis-à-vis ASEAN, once more putting Zheng He to the fore:

Let’s look at China’s history. Does China have the tradition and culture of aggression and expansion? I have noted many people across the world say “no.” China did not seek expansion or hegemony even at the time when it was the most powerful country in the world with 30% of the global GDP a few hundred years ago. Many of you know about Zheng He’s voyages to the Western Seas. Leading the most powerful fleet in the world, Zheng He made seven voyages to the Western Seas, bringing there porcelain, silk and tea, rather than bloodshed, plundering or colonialism. They also brought those countries tranquility and wellbeing by helping them fight pirates. To this day, Zheng He is still remembered as an envoy of friendship and peace, and his merits are widely recognized by people of Southeast Asia, including Indonesia.69

Thus, the use of Zheng He in this national mythmaking process and cogent political discourse reveals China’s intentions regarding the development of its maritime identity. Zheng He stood as an intelligible image to China’s foreign audience capable of changing how other states perceived its strategic identity. Although Holmes suggests that the figure of Zheng He was used for the purpose of broader objectives, such as legitimizing China’s maritime presence beyond the seas in its direct vicinity, drawing a favorable comparison with Western figures such as Christopher Columbus and the ensuing process of violent colonization, one of the core messages that China tried to carry over by using such historical narrative was to ensure that it was entitled to become a (peaceful) sea power in the eyes of both its foreign and domestic audience, a key step in the process of identity building.70

4.3. Mahan, the Chinese leadership, and its intelligentsia

It has become increasingly rare for an academic article on contemporary Chinese sea power not to begin with a preliminary remark on Zheng He. However, the use of this historical figure is not the sole element that shows that sea power is gradually being accepted as a dominant paradigm in China. Holmes and Yoshihara convincingly show that sea power has gained widespread recognition in Chinese scholarly and military circles. For instance, they argue:

67Yan, “Chinese Ocean Presence.”
68On March 2009, the USNS Impeccable was involved in a series of incidents with Chinese navy warships, maritime organization vessels, and fishing boats.
69China Daily, “Address by H.E. Dai Bingguo.”
70Holmes, “China Fashions a Maritime Identity,” 257–258; and Holmes and Yoshihara, “Soft Power at Sea,” 34–38. See also, Liu, Chen and Blue, Zheng He’s Maritime Voyages, 129.
Chinese naval thinkers have borrowed heavily from Mahan’s writings to express their own recommendations on how China ought to cope with maritime matters. This process of foreign adaptation has become particularly visible in recent years, as proponents of Mahanian thought have multiplied and become more forceful (italics added).71

The Chinese leadership and intelligentsia have thus become increasingly responsive to the sea power discourse, and more importantly, seem to acknowledge the correlation existing between great power status and sea power. Indeed, Holmes and Yoshihara state:

> the Mahanian notion that sea power is inseparable from national greatness, moreover, resonates with many Chinese strategists. None other than Admiral Wu Shengli, the commander of the PLAN, sounds a Mahanian note, proclaiming that China is an “oceanic nation” endowed by nature with a long coastline, many islands, and a massive sea area under its jurisdiction. Wu calls on Chinese citizens to raise their collective consciousness of the seas in order to achieve “the great revitalization of the Chinese nation.”72

Such utterance leaves the audience in no doubt regarding China’s growing adherence to sea power as a dominant strategic paradigm. However, it should be remembered that such recognition was rather slow to emerge due to materialistic constraints such as the presence of land threats and a feeble economic growth, but as long as these constraints no longer hamper China’s development, one could expect that Chinese leadership will continue to perceive and abide by the influence of sea power as a dominant strategic paradigm. One can also expect that such shift in China’s strategic identity and culture will have an increasingly significant effect on the conduct of diplomatic relations with other powers.

### 5. China’s quest for a sea power identity: implications

China’s quest for a sea power identity has several implications. Because identity in general and strategic identity in particular shapes a state’s behavior, and because it directly impacts states perceptions of the international scene, such an identity change has strong consequences on the international scene.73

First, identity contributes to the construction of a set of beliefs upon which leaders are prone to perceive and act. In the case of sea power, as explained before, scholars posit that states tend to act differently toward a continental power or a sea power when deciding to align or balance against a rising state. For instance, Thompson and Levy suggest that sea power is perceived as more benign than continental power because of the fact that sea powers are materially less bent toward aggressive expansion and do not threaten other states core sovereignty the way continental powers do.74

Second, scholars have emphasized the importance of the enmity between the “Self” and “Other” in bringing about conflict, particularly when this distinction is politically motivated.75 The distinction of sea power and continental power, and the discourse of sea power as a superior strategic identity reflect this dialectic so dear to identity-related

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71Holmes and Yoshihara, *Chinese Naval Strategy in the 21st Century*, 27.
72Holmes and Yoshihara, “A Chinese Turn to Mahan?”
73On the role of perception in international politics, see Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*.
74Levy and Thompson, “Balancing on Land and at Sea,” 7.
75A nuanced approach to cooperation and enmity between the “self” and the “other” was brought up by Richard Lebow, who argues that the construction of “self” and “other” does not necessarily lead to frictions, but rightly warns against political manipulations of identity in the furtherance of specific objectives which can lead to conflict (Lebow, “Identity and International Relations,” 488).
works – that of a superior “self” confronted to a barbarized “other.” A great maritime nation (or a sea power) is not only an identity, it is also a form of distinction. It is defined by its attributes such as “navies, coastguards, the marine or civil-maritime industries broadly defined and, where relevant, the contribution of land and air forces,” that serve its avowed purpose, “the capacity to influence the behaviour of other people or things by what one does at or from the sea.” As this work sought to argue, sea power also induces a certain type of behavior. Characteristically, a continental state (or land power) is the same in what it seeks (influence), but somewhat the opposite in how it achieves it. Its prevalence does not rely on the sea, its seaborne attributes are less important, which in turn generally engender a “continentalist” mindset. This distinction drawn between maritime nations and continental nations, or, in the strategic dialect, sea power and continental power, no matter how well or badly founded in terms of positivist and rigorous scientific methodology, does create a very tangible outcome in terms of perception and diplomacy. The supposedly enduring enmity between sea power and land power is a case in point, and has been part of a constant narrative of various conflicts over time. This has been particularly significant with the publication of Mahan’s seminal work. As presented earlier, although the principles enunciated were not original sensu stricto, the clarity of the argument and the scope of its impact on leaders from Tirpitz to Gorshkov had strong consequences on how leaders perceived sea powers, or what it meant to be a sea power. In his famed book The Sea Power of the State, Soviet admiral Gorshkov was moved by President Nixon’s declaration: “What the Soviet Union needs is different from what we need… They’re a land power. [...] We’re, primarily, of course, a sea power and our needs, therefore, are different.”

The Soviet Union, Gorshkov argued, was no less a sea power than the United States, and stating otherwise, as had President Nixon done in this address, was naught but denigration of past achievements and present interests. Moreover, it possibly became a point of friction, since Nixon was perceived by Soviet leaders as denying their aspirations. Hence, contrary to what cultural hegemony theories would predict, abiding to the dominant paradigm of sea power as a strategic identity, as professed by dominant sea powers such as Great Britain and the United States, neither results in obedience nor cooperation from other would-be rising sea powers such as China today, or Germany and the Soviet Union in their time. In fact, the dominant paradigm can become the nexus of power contestation. It may lead to a situation where the antagonism between self versus other becomes that of self versus self, and the enmity of sea power and land power is overhauled by a new race for sea power supremacy, because contesting powers seek to keep a strategic monopoly over this identity. This explains why great powers attempting to shift their identity from continental to maritime have more than often collided with the leading sea power of its time. In fact, Modelski and Thompson argued that major wars occurred when predominantly continental powers (i.e., great powers with great continental capabilities and usually growing naval capabilities) tried to seize rich industrial areas well connected to maritime areas, triggering the intervention of the leading sea power whose status relies on its access to the said

76Till, Seapower: A Guide, 27.
77Gorshkov, The Sea Power of the State, 69.
China’s naval expansion and U.S. worries over Chinese naval activity epitomize this contest for identity. Third, because identity is equally important in how a state perceives itself, and how its audience perceives it in return, the discrepancy existing between action and discourse can be damaging to the identity construction. While the legitimacy of China’s quest for a maritime identity is generally not contested, the peaceful nature of its naval expansion has been increasingly decried in the light of growing tensions in the South and East China Seas. Regarding the use of Zheng He in the political discourses of the Chinese leadership, the tide began to change around 2009–2010. While China continued to maintain a foreign policy speech based on China’s peaceful rise within which Zheng He acted as a symbolic image, foreign governments grew increasingly wary of what they perceived as Chinese assertiveness, particularly in the maritime realm. The arrival of Xi Jinping at the head of the PRC did not fundamentally change the course of China’s naval development. On the contrary, the new leadership continued to emphasize the importance of the sea and the development of the navy. However, territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas took a turn for the worse, as China’s relationship with the U.S. deteriorated. In 2009, the USNS Impeccable incident contributed to shift the attention of analysts on the activities of the PLAN. In 2010, the Senkaku collision incident further strengthened the image of a more aggressive China. Washington began to perceive more acutely what it thought was an increased assertiveness of China. This perception was also made possible with the United States’ disengagement from the war on terror in which it had canalized most of its military energy from 2001 to 2009. Identity construction cannot entirely overshadow the impact of the international structure within which states evolve, and if its audience perceives an important discrepancy between the discourse and the actions, it is bound to reject the legitimacy of the discourse and the identity construction process altogether.

Fourth, accepting that sea power has become a dominant strategic paradigm in the mind of a state’s leadership also has repercussions on the domestic structure of the state, or at least on its military apparatus. All things else being equal, the growth of the dominant strategic paradigm is a self-fueling process and ought to continue unless some exogenous factors such as the rise of a land threat or endogenous limits such as budgetary constraints are reached. Accepting sea power as a strategic identity and a strategic culture will modify the strategic norms, values, institutions, and artifacts to suit the new paradigm. Concretely, along the line of organizational theories, navy and maritime related organizations may have an increasingly preponderant role within the decision-making process, and may benefit from an increasing share of budgetary resources. This growing administrative power could result in the reshaping of security issues according to the strategic views of the organizations which support the dominant strategic paradigm, and in fact, this domestic pattern has been observed repeatedly in other great powers that have attempted to adopt sea power as a strategic identity.

6. Conclusion

This article has sought to demonstrate that sea power had increasingly become a dominant strategic paradigm, and that this resulted in continental states being driven
to adopt sea power as a strategic identity and strategic culture once material hurdles were removed. It presented the recent case of China and argued that the Chinese leadership, freed from land threats and economic constraints, now has the historic opportunity to change its strategic identity and is in the process of seizing it. Moreover, it has shown that this transformation has several implications both for China’s domestic structure and its diplomatic relations. However, several caveats are in order.

First, it is paramount to nuance the supremacy of sea power as a strategic paradigm in the mind of political leaders. While states accept sea power as an unavoidable attribute to great power status, continental powers usually end up reaching a balanced identity oscillating between the two extremes. In most cases, this is because continental powers cannot dismiss material constraints as well as the benefits brought by their continental identity from their strategic equations as easily as sea power. For instance, Xi Jinping’s policy orientation encompassed by his “One Road One Belt” slogan is a case in point of a state seeking to reap the benefits of its hybrid identity. Furthermore, while sea power as a dominant strategic paradigm may endure, it has to accommodate other growing strategic needs such as air power, nuclear deterrence, and now cyber warfare. These strategic needs, as well as land power, are more than often complementary to sea power and address issues located at a different level of strategic analysis, but they nonetheless represent competing agents in the race to budgetary resources.

Second, this hybridized identity sometimes results in peculiar policy choices and strategic interpretations. For example, the military leaderships of continental powers often project a land-oriented view of the maritime domain. The Soviet Union and China share certain characteristics in the way they attempted to create sea bastions, in the Sea of Okhotsk for the former, and in the South China Sea for the latter. The way China applies a narrow interpretation of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, and how it characterizes nearby waters as “blue national soil” also reflects an enduring continental mindset in the midst of its quest toward a sea power identity.

Third, further discussions on the relevance of this work’s arguments to other cases are certainly needed. For one, how unique is China’s naval buildup? In order to provide the start of an answer, it is important to replace the case of China within a broader international and historical perspective. On the surface, China’s own effort is in part uniquely determined and contextualized by historically and geographically independent variables. For example, such contemporary development as the advent of the Laws of the Seas and the nationalization of the maritime space, coupled with numerous territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas were challenges to China that neither Wilhelmine Germany nor the pre-war Soviet Union had to face in their own time. The uniqueness of China’s naval buildup has also been acknowledged and advertised by some scholars and research circles. For example, in 2009, the U.S. Office of Naval Intelligence released a report on the Chinese navy entitled The PLAN: A Modern Navy with Chinese Characteristics. Also, in their book Red Star over the Pacific, Holmes and Yoshihara talk of “naval tactics with Chinese characteristics.” The term of “Chinese characteristics” (中国特色), originally associated with the CCP dogma “Socialism with Chinese characteristics” (中国特色社会主义) but now used on a much wider range of topics, presses upon the audience the idea that

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80 Michishita, Ajia ni okeru Gunji Senryaku no Hensen, 51–72.
whatever subject is dealt with, is adapted to Chinese circumstances and therefore, unique. On the margin, there is no doubt that the Chinese navy followed its own path of development, and was confronted to many challenges, and became what it is today as a result of its own history and experiences. However, China’s decision to build a strong navy, and its desire to become a sea power stemming from identity construction processes are, more generally, rather common, and this is what this article has attempted to show. For instance, there is no doubt that China’s naval endeavors echo that of Wilhelmine Germany and the Soviet Union: a rising continental power faced with a more or less hostile and established sea power trying to develop a matching navy. Besides, these countries shared, at one moment or another, a heavy reliance on submarines and adopted a young school doctrine. Perhaps more surprisingly to some, China’s case is also not entirely different from Japanese and American experiences in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, respectively. China’s process of recognition of sea power as a dominant strategic paradigm parallels Mahan’s own avowed efforts to raise his very much continentally-minded fellow American citizens’ awareness for the importance of sea power. Similarly, although an island country, Japan did not share the characteristics of sea power until the Meiji Restoration and the influx of western ideas, among them that of sea power, into the country. Other factors such as the distribution of power, diplomatic engagements, domestic politics led the U.S. and Japan to becoming established sea powers relying on large surface fleets while China or the Soviet Union depended on large submarine forces, thus reflecting a tacit acknowledgment of a power disparity and not simply a mere doctrinal difference. In these factors lay the uniqueness which characterizes each country’s path to sea power, but the initial impulses, the cognitive processes leading to the recognition of sea power as a dominant strategic identity remain a common denominator.

These three points serve to illustrate that China’s quest for a sea power identity has yet to be completed, and that much remains to be done for China to be recognized as such by its international audience. They also suggest the need for further researches on the exact nature of this transformation, and encourage future comparative studies between the case of China and that of other countries.

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