INTERNATIONAL SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

INTERPRETING OSINT DATA: WHAT HISTORY IS FREELY TEACHING US ABOUT ONGOING EVOLUTIONS IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

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Abstract

The text focuses the attention on some major aspects of the ongoing strategically significant events and trends in the East China Sea and South China Sea (trends and events extensively covered by a lot of OSINT data), and evaluates the increasing tensions in these regions of the Pacific Ocean in a way which is deliberately taking into account what history is massively and freely teaching us. As far as the author is concerned, the more and more obvious and ambitious Chinese plans and actions in both seas are a direct and almost unavoidable consequence of a quick and massive evolution (or change) of the power status of China. At this very moment, Beijing is deliberately attempting to reach a more globally influential power status – that of world power, and in such a situation the attention paid by China to the Word Ocean and to the strategically significant routes leading to the open seas is larger than ever before in Modern Times. In a way or another, Chinese actions are nothing else but a renewed version of some well-known episodes in world history – those which have previously led other actors of the international arena to a more globally influential power status, by means of developing naval power and of gaining more free access to the World Ocean. In such a context, the United States is also deliberately trying to protect, according to a strategically legitimate, strong and long national tradition, the complete freedom of navigation, and the stability of the regional balance of power in both seas. Quite clearly, the strategic interests of both China and the U.S. are, in both seas we are speaking about, vastly different ones, and on a well defined collision course.

Keywords: power status, world power, sea power, World Ocean, strategic confrontation, China, the United States, the Pacific Ocean, regional balance of power, strategically significant routes, freedom of navigation, OSINT.

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At this very moment, China and the United States (together with regional allies of the US in the Far East and South-East Asia) are, quite clearly, on what we could legitimately call "collision course" in both the East China Sea and South China Sea. Along the past few months, a lot of *open sources* are reporting a lot on events and trends in the area which are significant for our debate: China is deliberately enlarging some tiny islands and reefs, in order to "build" larger islands, able to support large military airfields and other technologically advanced military facilities, including very powerful radars (Watkins, 2016, February 29); Beijing is also deploying in the region we are speaking about significant military contingents, including naval units and aircraft (Cohen, 2016, May 15); and China is also trying to push international bodies of all sorts officially recognize its "legitimate" sovereignty rights in the region (Blanchard and Petty, 2016, July 14), also trying to deny the U.S. warships and airplanes the possibility to freely move in the *international* waters China is openly claiming and in the airspace above them (Martina, Torode and Blanchard, 2016, May 11). We also know that South China Sea has a *very* important strategic value: roughly 33 % of the international trade in Asia and almost 50 % of the oil Asia needs are regularly crossing *this* very sea, which sooner or later – some authors are openly stating – *has* to be dominated, sooner or later, by China, *if* Greater China is to be established; and also that China is deliberately attempting to dominate all surrounding seas, in order to revive the system of borders (and areas of direct domination) in the era of the maximal development of the empire (Kaplan, 2012, p. 298-299). More than this, we also know the ongoing events and trends in the South China Sea are not at all accidental and / or without roots in the more or less recent history: almost 10 years ago, in 2007, for example, Beijing had "established the new Sansha municipality in Hainan province, which has jurisdiction over three islets that Vietnam claims in the Spratly and Paracel archipelagos" (Jacques, 2012, p. 377).

What history is teaching us about increasingly ambitious actors on the international arena

Along many centuries, any serious attempt aimed at getting an increasingly influential power status on the international arena has been – almost automatically – leading to an increased effort of the state we are speaking about to expand its influence in larger and larger regions of the World Ocean. In this context, we are to say that any state "that… has easy access to the high sea itself" obviously has a "strategic value of its position" which is "very high" (Mahan, pp. 31-32). We also know that "naval might has been one of the factors which has enabled individual states to advance into the

ranks of the great powers" and "moreover, history shows that those states which do not have naval forces at their disposal have not been able to hold the status of great power for very long" (Gorshkov, 1974, p. 3-5)

In the end, we are speaking about a basic rule anyone can easily understand: a globally significant power status directly means increased capabilities of pursuing interests (some of them vital ones) not only immediately beyond the borders, or in the continental region the state we are speaking about is placed, but on other continents as well. Practically, *world power status* (an exceptional status very few powers ever enjoyed – Wight, 1998, p. 62) necessarily means the ability to plan and reach strategically significant goals *anywhere* – or almost anywhere – in the world. But open seas and oceans represent roughly 70 % of the total area of the world, while continents and larger or smaller islands, put together, represent only the rest, which means only 30 % of the total area of our planet (Gorshkov, 1974, p.5). In such a situation, when a state is more or less deliberately "jumping" from a *regionally* significant power status to a *globally* significant power status, it has to: *a. strongly and quickly develop its naval capabilities; b. strongly enhance its presence in larger and larger regions of the World Ocean; and c. identify and implement solutions aimed at controlling – or, in case of need, opening – strategically significant routes directly leading to open seas and oceans*.

In order to accomplish such significant geo-strategic goals, several methods have been successfully used along the more or less recent stages of the world history. The first of them is deliberately *enhancing naval capabilities of all sorts*. From this very perspective, *any* actor really interested in gaining global power status *has* to have a more powerful Navy than before (and, more generally speaking, a larger naval power than before[1]). And a powerful Navy means at least two complementary evolutions: more combat ships, and also increasingly technologically advanced (or combat worthy) ones. This very logic is present in *many* occasions. Let us take into account, for example, the notorious and very significant case of Great Britain. Along less than one century and a half (from the late 1680s to 1815, at the end of the First French Empire), the total number of its wooden battleships sharply increased, from 100 to more than 200 (see *Table 1*), while in the case of *all* competitors London was more or less directly confronted with, the total number of the ships of the line clearly grew smaller. In order to better understand the meaning of this set of figures, let us take into account that the total number of large combat ships used to control the World Ocean stays almost the same along almost 150 years (355 ships in 1689, and 359 in 1815), but the share of

[1] In this context, *naval power* has at least two constitutive elements: the *Navy* (naval armed forces) and the *merchant marine* (vitally useful for large scale international trade).

this total represented by the ships of the line of the Royal Navy sharply increased, from roughly 28 % to almost 60 %). All these figures, put together, are allowing us to understand that, in spite of some losses along intense wars, the *Royal Navy grew two times more powerful along less than one century and a half* (if we are speaking about its capital ships), which is a really *impressive* pace of development of vital combat capabilities.

***Table 1*: Total number of major combat ships (ships-of-the-line) of the significant naval powers on the world arena, 1689 to 1815** (Kennedy, 2011, p. 110)

	1689	**1739**	**1756**	**1779**	**1790**	**1815**
Britain	100	124	105	90	195	214
Denmark	29	-	-	-	38	-
France	120	50	70	63	81	80
Russia	-	30	-	40	67	40
Spain	-	34	-	48	72	25
Sweden	40	-	-	-	27	-
Netherlands	66	49	-	20	44	-

Up to a certain point, *Germany* has been, in a quite recent past, a very potent example of the same sort. Until the end of the 19th century, its Navy was quite small, aimed mainly at properly defending the limited length of its coastlines in the Baltic Sea against some regional threats. Later on, when Germany deliberately started planning and implementing policies aiming a more visible global power status, the situation dramatically changed. *Along a few years (less than one generation), the Second Reich designed and built a large and very modern battle fleet*. In order to better understand this situation, let us take into account the basic figures offered by a very serious and broadly comprehensive history of naval warfare (see *Table 2*). Along a very limited amount of time (only slightly more than two decades and a half, between 1882 and 1908), the total number of the German capital ships increased two times, the total number of cruisers increased more than two times, and the total number of smaller combat ships (torpedo boats and destroyers, at least some of them ocean going vessels) grew more than 11 times larger.

***Table 2*: The German Navy – number of combat and support ships, 1882 to 1908** (Pemsel, 1975, p. 316)

Year	Capital ships (ironclads, later on ships of the line)	Heavily armored monitors to defend the coastline	Cruisers of all sorts (including armored ones)	Torpedo boats and destroyers	Auxiliary ships
1882	12	1	18	11	14
1908	24	8	38 (8 of them armored)	128	20

More recently, the *Soviet Union* also offered a third very potent example of the same sort, in which a strongly "boosted" power status of the country is accompanied by (and, up to a certain point, made possible by) a significant and continuous growth of the Navy. In the case of the USSR, we are speaking about total number of ships, but also about more and more active / aggressive operational and strategic plans, and also about increasingly feasible naval technologies, accompanied by pouring a lot of resources into transforming a "brown-water Navy" into a really potent "blue-water Navy" (see *Table 3*). In this case, we are also speaking about clearly complementary trends: the significant development of the power status of the Soviet Union (from regional / continental *great* power status to superpower / *world* power status, in the context of the Cold War and of efforts aimed at challenging the exceptional power status of the United States) was clearly accompanied by (and, up to a certain point, made possible by) the massive development of the Soviet Navy. Along slightly more than 20 years, from 1952 to 1974, the number of the Soviet cruisers (all of them large, ocean-going ships) grew more than two times larger, from 15 to 33 units. The number of destroyers (almost all of them large, ocean-going vessels) also grew significantly larger, from 90 to 150 units. The total number of submarines did not grow, but in 1974 almost a third of the submarines in the Soviet Navy were nuclear propelled ones, with a practically unlimited range, clearly able to reach *any* region of the World Ocean. And, up to a certain point, the very evolution of the Soviet Navy from a mainly defensive role to a globally capable political and strategic tool is strongly illustrated by the sharp growth of the total number of auxiliary vessels, able to support the deployment of Soviet ships to areas of the World Ocean *far away* from the shores of the USSR. Along these two decades, the total displacement of the combat ships of the Soviet Navy sharply increased, from 1.0 million tons to 2.1 million tons, while the total displacement of the auxiliary ships in the Soviet Navy also grew almost five times larger, from 0.3 million tons to 1.48 million tons (Pemsel, 1975, pp. 318-319).

***Table 3*: The Soviet Navy – number of combat ships of different types and of auxiliary ships, 1952-1974** (Pemsel, 1975, pp. 316, 318-19).

Year	Battleships	Cruisers	Destroyers	Submarines (conventional and nuclear propulsion)	Amphibious ships	Auxiliary vessels
1952	3	15	90	400	120	60
1974	-	33	150	390 (120 of then nuclear propelled)	160	330

And, in the end, the very evolution of the *U.S. Navy* – at this very moment the mightiest in the world – is another very potent example vividly illustrating in which way a strong naval force is a must whenever we are speaking about *real world powers*, those actors of the international arena with interests almost everywhere in the world, and with military capabilities enabling them to protect these interests even in very remote areas of the World Ocean (see *Table 4*). In this case, along less than 15 years (from 1938, the year immediately before the moment when World War Two started to 1952, a few years after the moment when NATO emerged), the number of U.S. Navy aircraft carriers grew more than 20 times larger; the total number of U.S. Navy cruisers and submarines grew roughly two times larger, while the total number of American destroyers (all of them ocean-going ships) grew almost two times larger. But the sharply increasing *global* role of the U.S. Navy, vital in maintaining and boosting the global political, strategic and economic role of the U.S. on the world arena is strongly made clear by the vast increase of the total number of auxiliary vessels of all sorts – from 100 to 850. More auxiliary ships means, in the end, a more potent logistic support system, allowing different squadrons, battle groups and individual ships of the U.S. Navy to be fully capable of operating, without any major break, very far away from national oceanic borders. The vast increase of the U.S. Navy as a support (or enhancer) of the *global power* (and later of *superpower*) status of the U.S. is also illustrated by the evolution of the total displacement of the ships we are speaking about: in 1938, all combat ships of the U.S. Navy put together had a total displacement of 1.4 million tons; 14 years later, the total displacement of the American combat ships was almost 3.5 times larger, already reaching 4.69 million tons (Pemsel, 1975, p. 318).

***Table 4*: The U.S. Navy – evolution of number of combat and auxiliary ships, 1938 to 1952** (Pemsel, 1975, p. 316, 318)

Year	Aircraft carriers	Capital ships (battleships, battle cruisers)	Cruisers of all sorts	Destroyers (all of them ocean-going)	Submarines	Auxiliary ships of all sorts
1938	5	15	34	221	90	100
1952	102	15	72	385	207	850

Brief presentation of the current stage of evolution of China's naval power

In a way or another, recent and ongoing evolutions of China's naval capabilities are strongly resembling the basic logic of the episodes briefly presented along the previous pages: we are clearly speaking about a sharp increase of the total number of combat and auxiliary ships China is able to deploy, and also about a significant amount of technological modernization of naval vessels. In this way, *a larger and more modern Chinese Navy emerges*, quite clearly an enhanced tool able to support more and more visible *global* ambitions of the political leaders in Beijing.

A few decades ago, in the late 1980s, a very reliable author is openly stating, continental China has already started to quickly and significantly expand its naval forces. Such a policy was one of the strategic tools aimed at eliminating what some called "strategic encirclement" (Kennedy, 2011, p. 397) of the country. In order to become stronger in strictly naval terms, China was already designing and building new types of ocean-going warships, including mode modern destroyers, escort ships, and also fast attack boats. Its conventionally propelled submarine fleet also grew larger and larger (107 units in 1985, the third such force in the world). The first really large missions far away from national shores took place in 1980, when no less than 18 combat ships sailed along a route 8,000 nautical miles long, in the Southern Pacific. The same author is also stating that, since 1982, China started to test a new generation of submarines armed with nuclear missiles (Kennedy, 2011, p. 399), and also that, in spite of really significant efforts, the Chinese Navy was not – at least at *that* very moment – a real "blue-water" one, able to successfully operate, in case of need, far away from homeports, anywhere on the World Ocean (Kennedy, 2011, p. 400).

Almost three decades later, in 2015, the Chinese naval power was already larger – in strictly quantitative terms – than that of *any* of its neighbors on the shores of the East China Sea and of the South China Sea. In a more detailed way, last year China had 303 combat ships of all sorts – 79 large surface combat ships[2], plus 107 small combat ships, plus 53 "amphibs" (amphibious ships), plus 64 submarines of all sorts (including almost two dozen nuclear ones), while the second-largest naval power in the region, Japan, had only 67 combat ships – "46 x Large Combatants", plus "0 x Small Combatants", plus "3 x Amphibs", and "18 x Submarines" (U.S. DoD, July 27,

[2] Frigates or larger – destroyers, for example.

2015, p. 12). The same text is openly stating: "China is modernizing every aspect of its maritime-related military and law enforcement capabilities, including its naval surface fleet, submarines, aircraft, missiles, radar capabilities, and coast guard. It is developing high-end technologies intended to dissuade external intervention in a conflict and designed to counter U.S. military technology. Although preparation for a potential Taiwan conflict remains the primary driver of Chinese investment, China is also placing emphasis on preparing for contingencies in the East and South China Sea. China sees a need for the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) to be able to support China's "new historic missions" and operational tasks outside the first island chain with multi-mission, long-range, sustainable naval platforms equipped with robust self-defense capabilities", also adding that "although quantity is only one component of overall capability, from 2013 to 2014, China launched more naval vessels than any other country in the region. The PLAN now possesses the largest number of vessels in Asia, with more than 300 surface ships, submarines, amphibious ships, and patrol craft" (U.S. DoD, July 27, 2015, p. 10).

Even more recently, in June 2016, a Congressional Research Service (CRS) report prepared for members and committees of the U.S. Congress was openly stating "China is building a modern and regionally powerful navy with a limited but growing capability for conducting operations beyond China's near-seas region", also adding that "observers of Chinese and U.S. military forces view China's improving naval capabilities as posing a potential challenge in the Western Pacific to the U.S. Navy's ability to achieve and maintain control of blue-water ocean areas in wartime – the first such challenge the U.S. Navy has faced since the end of the Cold War" (O'Rourke, 2016, p. i). This text is also listing, with really significant details, some already operational results of the Chinese efforts aimed at developing their Navy and which, put together, are shaping the grand design of a "blue-water Navy" able to act more and more globally, actively supporting the Chinese bid for getting, maintaining and consolidating *world* power status. The report is openly stating "China's military (including naval) modernization effort has been underway for about 25 years", and "observers date the beginning of the effort, to various points in the 1990s", while "design work on the first of China's newer ship classes appears to have begun in the later 1980s" (O'Rourke, 2016, p. 5). The report is also stating "in general, China's naval modernization effort to date has appeared focused less on increasing total platform (i.e., ship and aircraft) numbers than on increasing the modernity and capability of Chinese platforms. Changes in platform capability and the percentage of the force

accounted for by modern platforms have generally been more dramatic than changes in total platform numbers", also adding that "in some cases (such as submarines and coastal patrol craft), total numbers of platforms have actually decreased over the past 20 years or so, but aggregate capability has nevertheless increased because a larger number of older and obsolescent platforms have been replaced by a smaller number of much more modern and capable new platforms" (O'Rourke, 2016). Later on, the same report lists, very clearly, some missions Chinese Navy is preparing for. At least three of them are really important for our debate here: "defending China's commercial sea lines of communication (SLOCs), such as those linking China to the Persian Gulf"; and "displacing U.S. influence in the Western Pacific"; and "asserting China's status as a leading regional power and major world power" (O'Rourke, 2016, p. 7). The text we are speaking about is also listing new ships (or new ship types) the Chinese Navy is building and operating in order to consolidate its more and more extended capabilities and strategic responsibilities: a. *new non-nuclear submarines*: "China since the mid-1990s has acquired 12 Russian-made Kilo-class non-nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSs) and put into service at least four new classes of indigenously built submarines" (O'Rourke, 2016, p. 12); b. *new nuclear propelled submarines, armed with ballistic missiles* – those belonging to the JIN class, plus plans of "developing and fielding its next-generation SSBN, the Type 096, over the coming decade" (O'Rourke, 2016, p. 18); c. *aircraft carriers*: "on September 25, 2012, China commissioned into service its first aircraft carrier - the Liaoning, a refurbished ex-Ukrainian aircraft carrier, previously named Varyag, that China purchased from Ukraine as an unfinished ship in 1998"; we also know "the Liaoning is conventionally powered, has an estimated full load displacement of almost 60,000 tons, and might accommodate an eventual air wing of 30 or more aircraft" (O'Rourke, 2016, p. 19); China is also planning to build "its first domestic aircraft carrier" soon, and later on to "build multiple aircraft carriers over the next 15 years" (O'Rourke, 2016, p. 21); d. *new ocean-going destroyers and frigates*: "China since the early 1990s has purchased four Sovremenny-class destroyers from Russia and put into service 10 new classes of indigenously built destroyers and frigates", including "guided-missile" ships (O'Rourke, 2016, p. 26); e. *cruisers*: plans to "build a new cruiser (or destroyer), called the Type 055, that might displace roughly 10,000 tons. China is the only country known to be planning to build a ship referred to (by some sources at least) as a cruiser. (The U.S. Navy's current 30-year shipbuilding plan includes destroyers but no cruisers)" (O'Rourke, 2016, p. 27); and f. *a new class of large amphibious ships*: "China has put into service a new class of amphibious ships called the Yuzhao

or Type 071 class. The Type 071 design has an estimated displacement of more than 18,500 tons, compared with about 15,900 tons to 16,700 tons for the U.S. Navy's Whidbey Island/Harpers Ferry"; such ships, the report is stating, openly quoting a text made public by ONI, the U.S. Office for Naval Intelligence, will provide "considerably greater and more flexible capability for "far seas" operations than the older landing ships" (O'Rourke, 2016, p. 38).

But all these significant developments have a really limited meaning, if the growing Chinese Navy is not enjoying a greater degree of free access to the World Ocean. When we are speaking about *this* very problem, it is very easy – simply by means or carefully watching the map – to understand the *all* the three seas on the Eastern border of China are, in a way or another, almost landlocked geographic entities: Korean Peninsula, Japan, the Philippines and Malaysia are, up to a certain point, large natural barriers denying the Chinese any chance to easily and freely reach the Pacific in any circumstances we can imagine. Most probably, Beijing is even more worried by the very fact that all four countries listed above have *extensive* strategic ties with the U.S., at least three of them being main regional partners of the U.S. in the Far East. *In order to get the guarantee of a really free access to the World Ocean, China is most probably attempting to transform at least some of the surrounding seas into "Chinese lakes'; or, better said, into seas fully or completely dominated by Chinese forces*. In strictly geo-strategic terms, such a behavior is strongly resembling what Germany did in World War One, when Berlin tried a lot to forcefully open the routes leading to the Atlantic, or to go beyond the limits of the North Sea, also partially "landlocked" by Scotland, Norway and Iceland. For Germany, lack of access to the World Ocean generated a lot of negative consequences (Renouvin, 2001), and the greatest sea battle of World War One, that at Jutland / Skagerrak has clearly been a deliberate attempt to eliminate the British control of the routes leading to the really open seas, to crush the Royal Navy and "perhaps control the North Sea" (Potter, 1981, p. 207), thus gaining, *if* possible, completely free access to the World Ocean.

Some very brief conclusions

In our opinion, the strategically significant ongoing evolutions in the South China Sea and, up to a certain point, in the East China Sea can be more easily and soundly evaluated by means of using several "layers" of concepts – *very solid intellectual tools* enabling us to better understand a lot of facts present in various OSINT sources. In our opinion, one of the most useful – and clearly one of the strongest – interpretations of the ongoing events in both

seas listed above is one placing the concept of *strategic interest* at the very core of our debate. According to such a vision, ongoing events in South China Sea have a lot to do with an obvious strategic Chinese interest: that of getting, by any means, completely large-scale and free access to the World Ocean, by fully controlling the area we are speaking about. If free access to the World Ocean is missing or is limited, in different possible (and more or less probable) circumstances, the real meaning of the visible and massive development of the Chinese Navy as *truly global* tool might be seriously limited or even completely jeopardized, and *Beijing simply does not want to accept such an outcome in any case*.

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