

# **The Maritime Silk Road and the PLA<sup>1</sup>**

**A paper for China as a “Maritime Power” Conference**

**July 28-29, 2015**

**CNA Conference Facility**

**Arlington, Virginia**

**By**

**Morgan Clemens**

The past decade has seen a considerable amount of speculation concerning China’s military intentions in the Indian Ocean (and overseas generally), revolving in large part around the “String of Pearls” concept: a possible network of future Chinese naval and military installations stretching across the Indian Ocean. While this speculation has occasionally been ill informed—even verging on the feverish, with some Western observers foreseeing a veritable Chinese invasion of the Indian Ocean—it is clear that China has a real interest in an increased military presence and activities along the sea lanes vital to the Chinese economy. Chinese president Xi Jinping’s fall 2013 announcement of the new “one belt, one road” (一带一路) strategic initiative, based on the concept of the ancient Silk Road caravan route, has also served to further fuel such speculation. This is particularly the case with the initiative’s maritime component, generally referred to as the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” (21 世纪海上丝绸之路), which comprises a maritime trade and transportation route reaching though the South China Sea and Indian Ocean to the eastern Mediterranean, encompassing South and Southeast Asia, East Africa, and the Near and Middle East. The Maritime Silk Road makes it unmistakably clear that China’s strategic interests in and along the maritime routes leading to the west (as well as the number and vulnerability of Chinese citizens working in the adjacent countries) will only increase in coming years.

The vital issue, then, is the degree to which China’s increasing economic activity along these sea lanes will translate into increased military activity and what form any increased military presence might take, especially in terms of permanent installations and support bases. This entails assessing both China’s motivations for an increased military presence along the Maritime Silk Road and the various constraints Beijing will face in expanding that military presence. This

---

<sup>1</sup> The present paper is a revised and lengthened version of one presented at the Jamestown Foundation’s China Defense and Security Conference in Washington on 12 March 2015, and later published as a two-part series in the Foundation’s *China Brief* in March and April 2015. The author is deeply indebted to Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, former editor of *China Brief*, for the many excellent and material improvements he made to earlier drafts. Naturally, all errors and omissions remain those of the author.

paper will make the argument that *in the decade ahead* China will likely develop an increased military presence primarily along the Indian Ocean portions of the Maritime Silk Road, but that it will do so relatively slowly and that it will likely not develop explicitly military facilities to support this presence, remaining content to rely upon commercial ports.<sup>2</sup> China will, however, likely continue existing efforts to involve Chinese state-owned enterprises in the development and operation of major commercial port facilities in the region west of Singapore in order to ensure ease of access to port and replenishment facilities for Chinese naval vessels operating along the Maritime Silk Road.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, should this contention regarding the development of explicitly military facilities fail to materialize, such facilities would most likely appear first in East Africa, where China has the greatest freedom of action and room for maneuver in diplomatic and strategic terms.

### The Maritime Silk Road and Silk Road Economic Belt



Source: *Wall Street Journal*.

### Go West, Young Man

<sup>2</sup> It is unlikely that the Chinese would feel an immediate need for a significant naval or military presence in the Mediterranean, as the more immediate threats to Chinese investments, lives, and other interests exist east of the Suez Canal.

<sup>3</sup> Though the Maritime Silk Road does encompass the South China Sea, military bases and operations east of Singapore are not considered in this analysis since, in the Chinese view, they are largely not being built on foreign territory or undertaken in foreign waters.

The Maritime Silk Road already represents China's most vital sea lines of communication, both because it gives China access to three major economic zones (Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East) and because it is the route for many of China's strategic materials, including oil, iron ore, and copper ore imports. Moreover, active efforts to develop strategic and economic relationships along the Maritime Silk Road afford an opportunity (in the Chinese view) to escape the growing containment and encirclement embodied by the U.S. "pivot to Asia." Indeed, some Chinese military authors have gone so far as to call the route of the Maritime Silk Road "the crucial strategic direction of China's rise" (中国崛起的关键战略方向), indicating a belief that developing the route will be critical to the country's entire development program.<sup>4</sup> Language such as this could easily lead Western analysts to believe that China would wish to quickly ensure control of these sea lanes. Yet, the realization that such an objective could only be achieved by a navy several times the size of the current People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN)—the development and construction of which would be itself a vastly expensive undertaking that would not come to pass for some decades (if ever)—should give us pause.<sup>5</sup>

As Xi Jinping and the central leadership have continually emphasized in recent years, China's primary security concern is the preservation of conditions conducive to continued economic development. And, in the words of one Chinese scholar, "China's effort to build a middle-class society is entering a decisive stage under new historical conditions" during which external conditions could present a threat to larger social and economic development goals.<sup>6</sup> It is thus the task of the People's Liberation Army to act as a "security guarantee for China's peaceful development,"<sup>7</sup> largely by supporting China's efforts to diplomatically and economically tackle the "security dynamics along [the] periphery" (周边安全动态)<sup>8</sup> —with the "periphery" encompassing states, islands, and sea lanes critical to China's lines of communication, especially in the East China Sea, South China Sea, and Indian Ocean. Despite this emphasis, however, it remains clear that the region west of Singapore must be of secondary importance in military terms, with the most critical threat emanating from (perceived) American containment to the east, which also directly threatens China's national territory itself in the form of American forces'

---

<sup>4</sup> 梁芳 [Liang Fang], '今日"海上丝绸之路"通道风险有多大' [Today risks to the "Maritime Silk Road route" are many], 11 February 2015, available at [http://www.81.cn/jwgd/2015-02/11/content\\_6351319.htm](http://www.81.cn/jwgd/2015-02/11/content_6351319.htm).

<sup>5</sup> "Control" here means the ability to monopolize the sea lanes and prevent any other power from interfering with traffic along them.

<sup>6</sup> 蒋乾麟 [Jiang Qianlin], '加快推进国防和军队现代化的科学指南—深入学习习近平关于国防和军队建设重要论述' [A Scientific Guidance for Accelerating Modernization of National Defense and the Armed Forces—Thoroughly Studying Xi Jinping's Important Expositions on Building National Defense and Armed Forces], *中国军事科学* [*China Military Science*] 1 (2014): 12.

<sup>7</sup> State Council Information Office, "China's Military Strategy," 26 May 2015, available at <http://news.usni.org/2015/05/26/document-chinas-military-strategy>.

<sup>8</sup> '七大军区海空二炮支持习近平建新型司令机关指示' [The military regions, Navy, Air Force, and Second Artillery support Xi Jinping's directive to build a new type of headquarters organization], *解放军报* [*PLA Daily*], 24 September 2014.

deep strike capabilities.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, China's military modernization itself is far from complete and will require further expensive investments in training, systems, and personnel before the PLA can exercise the multitude of capabilities necessary for engaging in modern warfare across a wide range of domains (sea, air, cyber, and others).<sup>10</sup> Compounding this will be the need for ever greater social and domestic spending as the Chinese party-state attempts to guide the country through the fraught transition to a middle-class economy driven and sustained by domestic consumption, with the decade or so ahead serving as the critical juncture.

Thus, if we are to take Chinese leaders at their word when they say that China is still a developing country and indicate that there is no perpetual blank check for military development, it would seem that actual sea *control* along the Maritime Silk Road is not in the cards for China. And, indeed, it would appear that China's existing and future military activities west of Singapore are being cast not in this light but rather in terms of sea lane security and ensuring the sea lanes' continued utility as a global commons. Chinese analysts point out that small-scale, low-intensity action will be typical of the use of naval force in the years ahead, and that when China uses force along the Maritime Silk Route, it will often occur on short notice, be focused on low-grade threats (including terrorism, piracy, drug smuggling and other transnational crime), and be multilateral in nature. While involvement in interstate conflict is certainly possible, it is considered unlikely.<sup>11</sup> A fellow of the PLA's Academy of Military Science put it more bluntly: "China has only two purposes in the Indian Ocean: economic gains and the security of sea lines of communication."<sup>12</sup>

The sort of tasks engendered by the PLA's role in supporting the development of the Maritime Silk Road were exemplified in concrete form in March 2015, when the ships of the PLAN's anti-piracy task force in the Gulf of Aden were diverted to evacuate Chinese and other foreign nationals from Yemen, after Saudi Arabia and other regional states intervened in that country's ongoing civil war. Over a five-day period, two frigates and a supply ship made multiple transits between Djibouti and the Yemeni ports of Aden and Hodeidah, transporting more than 900 evacuees.<sup>13</sup> Chinese military commentary has emphasized the degree to which the mission required a rapid transition from escort operations to an evacuation, with limited warning time or

---

<sup>9</sup> 任海泉 [Ren Haiquan], '加强新时期新阶段国防和军队建设' [Strengthening National Defense and the Armed Forces Building at the New Stage in the New Period], *中国军事科学* [China Military Science] 3 (2013): 9-10.

<sup>10</sup> 邓红洲 [Deng Hongzhou], '强军要运用底线思维运筹未来军事斗争' [A Strong Army Necessitates the Use of Bottom Line Thinking in the Course of Future Military Struggles], *学习时报* [Study Times], 21 October 2013.

<sup>11</sup> 章骞 [Zhang Qian], '浅谈中国海军如何发展新海权 建海上丝绸之路' [An overview of how the Chinese navy is developing new seapower and building the Maritime Silk Road], 9 December 2014, available at <http://mil.news.sina.com.cn/2014-12-09/1142814596.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Zhou Bo, "The String of Pearls and the Maritime Silk Road," 11 February 2014, <http://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/the-string-of-pearls-and-the-maritime-silk-road/>.

<sup>13</sup> Zhang Yunbi, "China wins praise for evacuating foreigners," *China Daily*, 7 April 2015, available at [http://english.gov.cn/news/top\\_news/2015/04/07/content\\_281475084589891.htm](http://english.gov.cn/news/top_news/2015/04/07/content_281475084589891.htm).

preparation.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the evacuation operation required task force commanders to rapidly gather intelligence about events on the ground in Yemen and on the condition of available port facilities,<sup>15</sup> while also coordinating with Yemeni government forces to assure the safe passage of evacuees and others to the embarkation ports.<sup>16</sup> Taken together, the evacuation demonstrated both the rapid-reaction capabilities required of the PLA in supporting the Maritime Silk Road initiative as well as the ultimate purpose of the PLA's mission, namely safeguarding Chinese lives and interests, thereby making the whole initiative a more attractive proposition for Chinese citizens and enterprises. In the end, the objectives that China and the PLA seek to achieve along the Maritime Silk Road are perhaps most succinctly summarized (albeit in a more mundane context) by a statement from a Chinese merchant mariner whose ship received medical aid from PLAN vessels in the Gulf of Aden, as described in the PLAN's official newspaper: "No matter where we are, so long as our warships are there, we have a feeling of security!" (无论身处何方, 有祖国的军舰在, 我们就有安全感!).<sup>17</sup>

Given this emphasis, then, on security (as opposed to control) and on combating low-grade threats, it is clear that large, fully capable combat support bases such as those the U.S. Navy boasts in many parts of the world, would be grossly excessive to the PLA's needs along the Maritime Silk Road. Nonetheless, as other analysts have pointed out, we cannot necessarily expect China to continue to rely solely on local commercial facilities contracted by in-country military attachés and the Ministry of Transport on an ad hoc basis, especially as military operations along the Maritime Silk Road expand beyond their existing low benchmark.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, and as has been noted by Western analysts for some time (and has been more recently stated plainly by Chinese analysts), Chinese interest lies mainly in *access* to necessary military support facilities rather than possessing outright such facilities themselves.<sup>19</sup> Thus we can expect any development of physical facilities along the Maritime Silk Road to be relatively limited in nature, but there almost certainly will be development of some kind. That this will be the case is

---

<sup>14</sup> 李唐 [Li Tang], '中国海军舰艇顺利从也门撤离首批中国公民' [Chinese naval vessels smoothly evacuate the first Chinese citizens from Yemen], 中国海军网 [China Navy Online], 30 March 2015, available at [http://navy.81.cn/content/2015-03/30/content\\_6420528.htm](http://navy.81.cn/content/2015-03/30/content_6420528.htm).

<sup>15</sup> 张刚 [Zhang Gang], '为了让同胞远离战火' [To keep our countrymen from war], 中国海军网 [China Navy Online], 1 April 2015, available at [http://navy.81.cn/content/2015-04/01/content\\_6423141.htm](http://navy.81.cn/content/2015-04/01/content_6423141.htm).

<sup>16</sup> 刘万利 [Liu Wanli], '记者手记: 也门撤侨牵动人心' [A reporter's note: the Yemen evacuation moves the people], Xinhua, 31 March 2015, available at [http://navy.81.cn/content/2015-03/31/content\\_6421640.htm](http://navy.81.cn/content/2015-03/31/content_6421640.htm).

<sup>17</sup> "有祖国的军舰在, 我们就有安全感" [With the Motherland's warships there, we have a sense of security], 人民海军 [Renmin Haijun], January 7, 2015.

<sup>18</sup> Christopher D. Yung et al., *"Not an Idea We Have to Shun": Chinese Overseas Basing Requirements in the 21st Century* (Washington: National Defense University Press, November 2014); Andrew S. Erickson and Austin M. Strange, *No Substitute for Experience: Chinese Antipiracy Operations in the Gulf of Aden* (Newport: Naval War College Press, November 2013), pp. 51, 124–127.

<sup>19</sup> Daniel J. Kostecka, "Places and Bases: The Chinese Navy's Emerging Support Network in the Indian Ocean," *Naval War College Review* 64, no. 1 (Winter 2011); Zhou Bo, "The String of Pearls and the Maritime Silk Road," 11 February 2014, <http://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/the-string-of-pearls-and-the-maritime-silk-road/>.

made clear in Chinese writings that describe “infrastructure connectivity” (基础设施互联互通) as a key element of the Maritime Silk Road, including a lengthy essay published in July 2014 by Liu Cigui, director of the State Oceanic Administration. In the essay, Liu states, “Sea lane security is critical to sustaining the stable development of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, while port facilities are the foundation of sea lane security” (航道安全是 21 世纪海上丝绸之路持续稳定发展的关键，而港口码头是保障航道安全的重中之重), and says that China must therefore help to establish “sea posts” (海上驿站) that can support and resupply the ships traveling (and securing) the sea lanes. Liu goes on to state that such “sea posts” could be newly built, either by individual countries or with the help of China, or that China could lease (租用) existing facilities.<sup>20</sup>

Coming from such an official source, these statements appear to confirm the limited nature of Chinese military support facilities along the Maritime Silk Road in the decade ahead. Yet, other semi-official sources seem to indicate that other streams of thought certainly exist within official discourses. Typical of these are the contentions of National Defense University professor and strategist Liang Fang (also cited earlier) that a military presence along the Maritime Silk Road must serve to *deter* any potential enemy and that, ultimately, sea lane security can only be assured by carrier battle groups on station.<sup>21</sup> While this line of thinking likely represents only a maximalist view of the PLA’s mission, probably influenced by the desire of some within the PLAN for a mission to justify a large multi-carrier fleet, it still must be taken into consideration as future strategic and budgetary debates take place within the Chinese military and civilian leadership, with the potential to change China’s calculus *vis-à-vis* a military presence along the Maritime Silk Road. Nonetheless, the more limited view discussed above likely prevails at present, and will likely continue to do so during the next decade, especially as it would take *at least* that long to build and develop the sort of force necessary to make the maximalist view a reality.

### **Constraints on China’s Military Presence West of Singapore**

From the above discussion, it is apparent that China has real motivations for an expanded military presence in the Indian Ocean. These motivations, however, are not unlimited. Moreover, they will be balanced by a number of practical and strategic constraints that will serve to dictate a slow pace of growth in such a military presence. Now that this paper has laid out China’s basic purpose in building up a military presence and supporting bases along the Maritime Silk Road, it must assess exactly what constraints China will face in achieving these objectives.

---

<sup>20</sup> 刘赐贵 [Liu Cigui], ‘发展海洋合作伙伴关系 推进 21 世纪海上丝绸之路建设的若干思考’ [Developing maritime cooperative partnerships: Reflections on building the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road], *国际问题研究* [International Studies], 2014, no. 4.

<sup>21</sup> Liang, “Today, Risks to the ‘Maritime Silk Road.’”

The first set of constraints (and perhaps the most critical) is that which Chinese leaders place upon themselves. As many analysts have noted, China's leaders have long avoided involvement in other countries' affairs, making that a key rhetorical and practical plank of their foreign policy—a plank which remains largely intact and would at the very least be complicated by efforts to obtain and maintain military facilities in countries lying on the Maritime Silk Road.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the Chinese have generally shown that while China may be a revisionist power, it is not radically so; they prefer to make gradual, progressive, and incremental changes in existing geopolitical orders to better suit their own ends.<sup>23</sup> Beyond this, they cannot help but be aware of the potential for conflict with India incumbent upon any rapid or forceful military expansion into the region;<sup>24</sup> such expansion would be almost certain to exacerbate the presently mild degree of strategic competition between the two. A similar consideration would also have to be paid to the United States, which would certainly not sit diplomatically or politically idle as Chinese bases were built in the Indian Ocean or Middle East.

Beyond these self-imposed constraints, there is the possible (even likely) reluctance of states along the Maritime Silk Road to host any explicitly military facilities. As other Western analysts have pointed out, for more than a decade, leaders from a whole host of states have directly, forcefully, and repeatedly denied any intention of allowing China to build military facilities on their territory—and, indeed, if China ever did have a strategic initiative along the lines of the “String of Pearls,” it would certainly have to be considered an abject failure, having produced no real accomplishments in the past decade.<sup>25</sup> For its part, the Chinese government is certainly aware that most of the states in question are post-colonial in nature and therefore often prickly on points of national sovereignty and foreign intrusion (military or otherwise).<sup>26</sup> Of course, China does have tools to overcome such resistance, especially in the form of its generous economic largesse and developmental aid, but it is still entirely possible that states in the region could closely cooperate with China in economic and transportation matters while still looking elsewhere (to the United States and India, among others) for cooperation on security affairs.<sup>27</sup>

A final constraint is imposed by the United States and, to a lesser extent, other powers by virtue of their own existing military presence in the region. Other Western analysts have noted that the

---

<sup>22</sup> Kostecka, “Places and Bases.”

<sup>23</sup> Zheng Wang, “China’s Alternative Diplomacy,” *The Diplomat*, 30 January 2015, available at <http://thediplomat.com/2015/01/chinas-alternative-diplomacy/>.

<sup>24</sup> 郑亮 [Zheng Liang], ‘21 世纪海上丝绸之路国际研讨会第一圆桌会议举行’ [The first roundtable conference of the international forum on the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road was held], 12 February 2015, available at [http://news.china.com.cn/2015-02/12/content\\_34807157.htm](http://news.china.com.cn/2015-02/12/content_34807157.htm).

<sup>25</sup> Yung et al., *Not an Idea We Have to Shun*, p. 27.

<sup>26</sup> Most recently, a change in government precipitated by a January 2015 presidential election in Sri Lanka appeared to derail (or at least complicate and make less certain) various Chinese efforts to develop port facilities in that country, and also threatened to prevent a repeat of the 2014 port call by a PLAN submarine. “Sri Lanka suspends China port city project,” *The Economic Times*, 5 March 2015.

<sup>27</sup> Zheng, “China’s Alternative Diplomacy.”

approximately twenty PLAN escort task forces dispatched to the Gulf of Aden since 2008 have mostly used Aden, Djibouti, and Salalah for resupply and replenishment—implying that these ports would be the most likely locations for the PLAN to develop some sort of fixed support infrastructure in the region.<sup>28</sup> While this is very likely the case, it should also be noted that those very ports are the ones most commonly used by U.S. and other naval vessels in the region, making the development of both extensive and explicitly military support facilities on the part of the Chinese unlikely in the near term.<sup>29</sup> The May 2015 reports of negotiations between China and Djibouti on this point are perhaps indicative. An apparent two-year period of negotiations had yet to produce anything more than a vague intention to increase China’s military support capabilities in Djibouti, with no indication that this would extend beyond more formalized port access rights or that it actually would include a permanent and explicitly military presence.<sup>30</sup> Even the somewhat sensationalist (and still unconfirmed) reports which emerged in the Chinese press in August of 2015, stating that US forces would be forced to cease use of the American-built port facilities at Obock (also in Djibouti) to make way for the PLA, remain unconvincing.<sup>31</sup> Obock is a relatively small port facility on the north shore of the Gulf of Tadjoura, more than 20 miles distant from Djibouti City, Camp Lemonnier, and other military forces. If the PLAN were seeking an operating location Djibouti but as far as possible from American and other Western forces, they could do no better than Obock. None of this is to say that China will not develop facilities at these (or other) locations to support and sustain PLA forces in the region; rather, it indicates that these facilities will likely not themselves be military in nature.

### **What to Expect in the Decade Ahead**

In their recent detailed report on the issue of future Chinese overseas basing, Christopher Yung and other researchers from the U.S. National Defense University lay out six possible models from which the Chinese might choose, ranging from their existing dependence on ad hoc arrangements at local commercial facilities to a full-scale American-style network of combat support bases. In their analysis, Yung and his colleagues particularly point to what they call the “Dual-use Logistics Facility” model as the one most likely to be adopted by the Chinese if they do not intend to engage in any sort of large-scale combat operations in the Indian Ocean. In this model, a Chinese base in the region would provide “medical facilities, refrigerated storage space

---

<sup>28</sup> Yung et al., *Not an Idea We Have to Shun*, pp. 30–31.

<sup>29</sup> Djibouti actually hosts Franco-American military forces, while Aden has long been a replenishing point for Western naval forces operating in the region. Even Salalah regularly hosts American naval vessels and has become the focus of American efforts to develop its port facilities. Mina Group, “U.S. ambassador visits Port of Salalah site,” 28 January 2014, available at <http://www.minagroup.com/manage/us-ambassador-visits-port-salalah-site/>; “US envoy connects with Salalah,” *Times of Oman*, 4 February 2014, available at <http://www.timesofoman.com/News/Article-29272.aspx>.

<sup>30</sup> Lina Benabdallah, “What’s the deal with China’s new military base in Djibouti?,” 18 May 2015, available at <http://africasacountry.com/what-does-it-mean-that-china-has-a-military-base-in-djibouti/>; Sean MacCormac, “China planning naval base in Djibouti,” 13 May 2015, available at <https://www.centerforsecuritypolicy.org/2015/05/13/china-planning-navy-base-in-djibouti/>.

<sup>31</sup> Shannon Tiezzi, “Will China Take Over US Military Facility in Djibouti?,” *The Diplomat*, 21 August 2015.

for fresh vegetables and fruit, rest and recreation sites, a communications station, and ship repair facilities to perform minor to intermediate repair and maintenance.” Such a base would be small and likely utilize only 100 to 200 personnel.<sup>32</sup> This analysis is sound, as the “Dual-use” model most evenly balances the objectives, constraints, and capabilities discussed above.

One reasonable (and minor) divergence from this conclusion is the possibility that such a base would not necessarily be explicitly military in nature, especially early on. The fact that the PLAN uses the term *yizhan* (驿站)—connoting the old-fashioned posting stations at which official couriers and mail carriers would change to fresh horses in mid-journey—to describe the “sea posts” discussed earlier likely indicates a very limited military purpose for the “sea posts.”<sup>33</sup> It is also potentially indicative of the degree to which the PLAN may be able to “piggy-back” on a network of Chinese-run overseas commercial port facilities—for example, those built, developed, and operated by state-owned corporations, such as the China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) and China Merchants Holdings International Co., Ltd. (CMHI).<sup>34</sup> While this possibility has occasionally been mentioned in the Chinese press, the author has yet to identify any authoritative Chinese military writings describing this as a definite intention; thus it remains only a supposition, but a reasonable one considering COSCO’s longstanding role in the supply of PLAN vessels operating in the Gulf of Aden. COSCO presently has management stakes in four overseas ports: Antwerp, the Piraeus, Suez, and Singapore. COSCO also operates individual terminal management companies in other overseas ports. The expansion of this presence remains stated company policy.<sup>35</sup> CMHI likewise boasts an 85 percent stake and a 35-year operating concession in Colombo’s new international port terminal and a 23.5 percent stake in the new port extension at Doraleh in Djibouti, which will include deep-water berths, servicing berths, and other support facilities.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> Yung et al., *Not an Idea We Have to Shun*, pp. 14 and 43. The utility of small bases will be enhanced by the increasing use of 3D printing and similar technologies, which will serve to make even frigates and destroyers that much more independent of the land. Sarah Anderson Goerhke, “China’s PLA Navy deploys 3d printers onboard warships to replace small parts,” 8 January 2015, available at <http://3dprint.com/35981/china-pla-navy-3d-printing/>.

<sup>33</sup> Of course, the further fact that the term has also been applied to the plainly military facilities being built in disputed areas of the South China Sea does complicate this assertion, but it is reasonable to view the use of the term in the west of Singapore context as generally accurate and its use in the South China Sea as a sort of propaganda or convenient euphemism.

<sup>34</sup> CMHI is a subsidiary of the state-owned China Merchants Group, headquartered in Hong Kong.

<sup>35</sup> COSCO, “Terminal portfolio,” accessed at [http://www.coscopac.com.hk/eng/business/terminal\\_portfolio.php14](http://www.coscopac.com.hk/eng/business/terminal_portfolio.php14); COSCO, ‘码头业务’ [Terminal services], accessed at <http://cn.chinacosco.com/col/col903/index.html>; COSCO, ‘全球中远’ [Global COSCO], <http://www.cosco.com/col/col51/index.html>; “COSCO Pacific looking to invest in overseas ports,” *Port Finance International*, 26 March 2014, available at <http://portfinanceinternational.com/categories/finance-deals/item/1399-cosco-pacific-looking-to-invest-in-overseas-ports>.

<sup>36</sup> Derek Yan and Angela Yu, “China’s Maritime Silk Road takes shape from Sri Lanka to Africa,” *IHS Maritime Fairplay*, 17 April 2015, available at [http://www.joc.com/port-news/asian-ports/china%E2%80%99s-maritime-silk-road-takes-shape-sri-lanka-africa\\_20150417.html](http://www.joc.com/port-news/asian-ports/china%E2%80%99s-maritime-silk-road-takes-shape-sri-lanka-africa_20150417.html).

It is in this context that China's investment and development largesse could best be used, by first ensuring that there *are* commercial ports in the region that fit China's strategic requirements and second by ensuring that employees of Chinese state-owned enterprises (functionally equivalent to state officials, at least for our purposes) are directly involved in the day-to-day management of those facilities and thereby well positioned to assure Chinese military access to the facilities on a more consistent and reliable basis. While this would perhaps represent a *marginally* less certain degree of access than if the facilities were explicitly military in nature, it would likely be balanced by the *somewhat* less fraught (and provocative) effort to obtain commercial port management rights, as opposed to even limited military basing rights.<sup>37</sup>

Based on both the basic objectives and general constraints discussed here, it would seem reasonable to predict that in the next decade China's military presence west of Singapore will expand, but only to the degree necessary to carry out the general sea lane protection missions currently envisaged. The facilities to support these forces and missions will be concomitantly limited in size and will likely not even be explicitly military in nature. Or, conversely, viewed from the opposite direction, China's military presence west of Singapore cannot expand without a proportionate expansion in the infrastructure available to support it, and, given the constraints discussed above, we can expect such an infrastructure expansion to take place only slowly, thereby dictating a slowly expanding military presence in general.

The one geographic area in which there is, perhaps, a lower probability of this prediction holding true is East Africa. The past decade has seen China slowly but steadily building up a strategic and economic presence in places such as Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi, Madagascar, and the Seychelles, and this region has yet to become the focus of a permanent, large-scale U.S. military presence or particularly strong American strategic relationships.<sup>38</sup> Thus, East Africa is perhaps the portion of the Maritime Silk Road along which China presently has the greatest degree of strategic freedom of action, being not yet constrained by an overwhelming degree of U.S. activity. Moreover, considering both the longstanding diplomatic (and even military) links that China has with various East African states, as well as those states' notable poverty (even in comparison to other states along the Maritime Silk Road), China would likely get the best "bang for the buck" when using investment and development as tools for obtaining access to facilities. Thus, if China *were* to develop explicitly military bases for supporting forces anywhere along the Maritime Silk Route, it would most likely be in East Africa,<sup>39</sup> where there is the least probability

---

<sup>37</sup> This would not preclude the presence of *any* Chinese military personnel at such facilities, but they would likely be very few in number and mostly focused on providing direct liaison services between the facility and the ships, much as the attachés do now.

<sup>38</sup> In this context, East Africa is taken to exclude the Horn of Africa (Somalia, Ethiopia, etc.).

<sup>39</sup> Recent months have even seen speculation on the possibility of a PLAN operating base at Walvis Bay in Namibia, on the Atlantic. See: Robert C. O'Brien, "China's next move: A naval base in the South Atlantic?," *Real Clear Defense*, 25 March 2015, available at [http://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2015/03/25/chinas\\_next\\_move\\_a\\_naval\\_base\\_in\\_the\\_south\\_atlantic\\_107803.html](http://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2015/03/25/chinas_next_move_a_naval_base_in_the_south_atlantic_107803.html).

of tension or confrontation (at least at present) with the United States, India, or other regional powers.<sup>40</sup>

## **Looking Beyond 2025**

As stated at the beginning, the present analysis is limited in scope to the decade ahead, but it is nonetheless pertinent to discuss at least briefly those factors which will influence China's attitude toward overseas basing and military operations after that timeframe has passed. Making predictions beyond this point would be an exercise in futility, as they depend on a number of currently unknowable variables. First and foremost among these variables will be Chinese motivations—namely, the Chinese leadership's own perception of whether overseas bases and operations have been worth the political, diplomatic, and fiscal expense involved. If the leadership's perception is positive, they will likely seek to expand China's bases and operations both geographically and quantitatively; if their perception is negative, we can expect to see retrenchment (or at least no further expansion). Next, assuming that China's leaders continue to see net utility in overseas bases and operations, there would be the question of the country's capability to sustain and expand them. Ultimately the maintenance of military power overseas is dependent upon basic, long-term economic vitality at home, and the decade ahead will almost certainly be critical in determining whether China's historically rapid economic development can continue on a more sustainable path. Thus, the question of whether China will be able to continue expanding the military's overseas presence in a decade's time will depend in large part on the domestic policy decisions that Chinese leaders will make between now and then.

A final factor to consider is the actions of other major powers in the region, especially the United States and India. As noted previously, China will not spend the next 10 years operating in a vacuum, and Chinese actions will almost certainly engender significant political, diplomatic, and economic responses on the part of other powers. For instance, should the United States or India (or both) come to view any significant Chinese military presence west of Singapore as a serious problem, it could very easily engage in a calculated policy to develop key ports and form strategic relationships with the key states in the region in order to limit Chinese opportunities to do so.<sup>41</sup> If this should come to pass, in 10 years' time China's leaders could well find themselves both willing and able to further expand their military presence overseas but without the necessary openings and opportunities.

## **L'Envoi**

---

<sup>40</sup> Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, "Chinese navy escort fleet leaves Mombasa after visit to Kenya," 9 January 2014, available at <http://www.focac.org/eng/zj/zjfq/t1116035.htm>; and *defenceWeb*, "China and Tanzania conclude historic naval exercise," 18 November 2014, available at [http://www.defenceweb.co.za/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=37029:china-and-tanzania-conclude-historic-naval-exercise](http://www.defenceweb.co.za/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=37029:china-and-tanzania-conclude-historic-naval-exercise).

<sup>41</sup> This should not be construed as either a recommendation or a prediction on the part of the author; it is merely an observation.

As a coda, it is useful to emphasize that there is very little inevitability concerning the expansion of China's military presence along the Maritime Silk Road. For any nation, obtaining actual military bases overseas is an expensive, time-consuming, politically and diplomatically fraught process involving real costs and risks. It may be very easy for Americans of today to look on our own vast global network of well-developed military bases and think of them as just a part of the natural geopolitical order, but they are not. They are in fact the product (or perhaps the fruits) of abnormal conditions. Most of the major foreign military bases we utilize today were first obtained during a period of intense and near-permanent national mobilization from about 1940 through the early 1970s. Facing grave existential threats during the Second World War and the first decades of the Cold War, the enormous political and fiscal costs associated with overseas bases were discounted, while the powers most likely to view such expansion as potentially threatening under normal circumstances (namely, Britain and France) were forced into acquiescence by dint of circumstance (namely, the fact that they were our allies). Thus, while our overseas bases and military presence were not developed on the cheap, they did largely come into being by virtue of extremely favorable domestic and international political conditions. It should be always borne in mind that China does not currently benefit from such conditions (or anything even approaching them) and almost certainly will not do so in the decade ahead, barring some radical and unpredictable change in the current international environment. China will likely seek an expanded military presence west of Singapore, but the sheer number of strategic, political, and other potential obstacles is such that, over the course of the next decade, any such expansion will certainly take place slowly and be qualitatively limited.