# THE STRUGGLE FOR THE STRAITS IN THE NORTHWESTERN PACIFIC: TAIWAN AT THE CENTER OF A GEOSTRATEGIC SHIFT

HUGUES EUDELINE
NOTE 80, JUNE 2026

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**Paris**
91, rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré
F-75 008 Paris

**Bruxelles**
Clos des Salanganes, 5
B-1150 Bruxelles

www.institut-thomas-more.org
info@institut-thomas-more.org

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**Hugues Eudeline** is a research director at the Thomas More Institute. A former naval officer and engineer, he holds a Ph.D. in military history, defense, and security from the École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE, Paris), and is a graduate of the French higher military education system (École supérieure de guerre navale and Cours supérieur interarmées, Paris) and the United States (Naval Command College, Newport) and holds a Master of Science (Salve Regina University, Newport). Previously a lecturer at Sciences Po Paris, ESCEM, and ICES, as well as a speaker and essayist, he devotes his research to the geopolitics and geostrategy of the global ocean. He is a specialist in maritime China in particular. In 2022, he received the General Maritime Strategy Award from the French Naval Academy (Académie de Marine) and the Silver Medal from the Royal Swedish Naval Academy, of which he has been a corresponding member since 2013. He is the author of *Géopolitique de la Chine. Une nouvelle thalassocratie* [Geopolitics of China: A New Thalassocracy] (PUF, 2024) •

# Table of Contents

# Abstract

**The clash between the terrestrial Behemoth and the marine Leviathan** • From south to north, the Asian continent is separated from the Pacific Ocean by a succession of marginal seas (South China Sea, East China Sea, Yellow Sea, Sea of Japan, Sea of Okhotsk), which are themselves enclosed by a chain of three archipelagos—Indonesia, the Philippines, and Japan—to which Taiwan is added. None of these islands belong to the continental powers that form a near-continuous coastal line of the three nuclear autocracies: the People's Republic of China (PRC), North Korea, and Russia. Connecting these seas to one another and to the ocean, strategic straits (Malacca, Taiwan, Bashi, Miyako, Korea, La Pérouse…) constitute vital chokepoints for the trade and fleets of these regimes. The "first island chain" thus forms a potential cangue encircling China, with Taiwan serving as both its lock and its pivot. The stakes can be framed in Schmittian terms: the clash between the terrestrial Behemoth (the autocracies) and the maritime Leviathan (the democracies led by the United States, Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines). Several scenarios are conceivable: a rapid seizure of Taiwan by amphibious assault, a prolonged blockade with severe economic consequences, or a high-intensity war.

**The geostrategic importance of the straits near Taiwan** • Taiwan's coastline lies along the major circumnavigation route that connects the world's leading economies. It is useful to understand the history of China's maritime modus operandi (from the bloody failure at Jinmen in 1949 and the successful conquests of Hainan and Wanshan in 1950 thanks to the mass requisitioning of fishing boats), U.S. involvement (Truman's withdrawal, the reversal with the deployment of the Seventh Fleet during the Korean War, the 1954 Mutual Defense Treaty), and then the three Taiwan Strait crises (1954–55, 1958, 1995–96), each marked by Beijing's retreat in the face of the U.S. aircraft carriers' power projection capabilities. These setbacks fueled China's decision to build an ocean-going navy and acquire nuclear weapons. Today, the Taiwan Strait remains a major economic and strategic passageway, the scene of regular freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) by the U.S., France, etc. and now Japan. The deeper Bashi and Miyako Straits are essential for the covert passage of submarines into the Pacific and for the network of undersea cables.

**Taiwan, the central lock of the cangue of the chain of islands** • The South China Sea is the only body of water deep enough to shelter the "bastion" where China's ballistic missile submarines patrol, ensuring a second-strike capability. Confined to its nearby seas, unable to "dilute" its SSBNs in the open ocean, China has established outposts in the Paracels and a naval air complex in the Spratleys. The report details the capabilities intended to break this cangue: an effectively executed aircraft carrier program (*Liaoning*, *Shandong*, *Fujian*, and the future nuclear-powered Type 004, with a goal of nine carriers by 2035), amphibious assault ships, *Shuiqiao* floating docks, marine corps, and special forces. The new crises since 2022 (response to Nancy Pelosi's visit, *Justice Mission 2025* exercises, gatherings of 1,700 fishing boats) have created a state of simmering conflict and a familiarization to the threat aimed at lowering Taiwanese vigilance. In the event of a high-intensity war, the submarine battle would be decisive: "aircraft carrier killer" missiles, mine warfare in the straits, the AUKUS partnership, and the revitalization of the submarine forces of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan (*Hai Kun*). Unlocking Bashi would be essential for Beijing to unleash its deterrence – which in itself justifies the takeover of Taiwan.

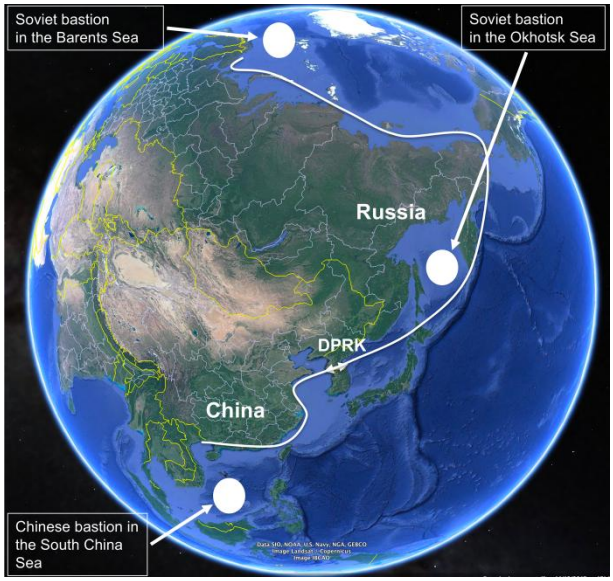
**The near-continuous coastal stretch of the three nuclear autocracies** • Taking a long-term view, one must trace Russia's expansion toward the Pacific, from the Cossacks of the 17th century to Peter the Great and Bering's expeditions, all the way to the ongoing quest for access to open waters connecting Murmansk to Vladivostok. It recalls the Sino-Russian treaties: Nerchinsk (1689) and the "unequal treaties" of Aigun (1858) and Beijing (1860), through which Russia wrested from China the part of Siberia south of the Amur River and founded Vladivostok. The naval disaster at Tsushima (1905) illustrates Russia's need for a Northeast Arctic route, which global warming has now made navigable. This third part then examines the alliances of the Behemoth: North Korea, Moscow's only true ally, and China, its partner, linked by increasing joint military exercises. But the weight of historical disputes should not be underestimated: China, whose thinking is rooted in the long term, has not forgotten the loss of Siberia and could, in the long run, demand reparations. The rivalry for control of the straits and Arctic routes could pit a China that has become a maritime power against a Russia that has remained a land power.

**Doubts and uncertainties** • Taiwan, a strategic hub for major shipping routes and a potential lock for the cangue, poses a major threat to China's primarily maritime economy. Xi Jinping's desire to resolve this issue quickly, however, is hampered by the uncertainty surrounding an offensive whose failure would have disastrous political consequences. This could explain the successive dismissals at the top of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), whose highest-ranking officers reportedly believe, according to some sources, that they are not ready.

# Introduction

From Singapore to the Kamchatka Peninsula, the Asian continent is separated from the Pacific Ocean by a series of seas—in succession, from south to north, the South China Sea, the East China Sea, the Yellow Sea, the Sea of Japan, and the Sea of Okhotsk. These bodies of water are separated from the Pacific Ocean by a series of islands—including the geopolitical island that is the Republic of Korea (South Korea) (1) —none of which belong to the continental powers bordering the other shores. The latter constitute a coastal continuum of the "three nuclear autocracies," which includes the People's Republic of China (PRC), the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), and the Russian Federation. This coastal continuum extends from the PRC's border with Vietnam to the Bering Strait, and continues along the Russian Arctic coast to the Norwegian border on the Kola Peninsula (Figure 1).

**Figure 1 • The near-uninterrupted coastal stretch of the three nuclear autocracies and the Soviet and Chinese bastions**




The seas that follow one another along the continent are connected by straits that are indispensable for maritime traffic—particularly that of these autocracies—the main ones being the Straits of Malacca, Taiwan, Korea, and Tsushima, as well as the La Pérouse Strait. Their logistical importance is, and would always be, of the utmost significance in the event of a conflict with the Indo-Pacific democracies. These seas bordering the Pacific Ocean are accessed via numerous straits that pass between the islands of the three successive archipelagos (Figure 2). From south to north, these are Indonesia (17,000 islands), the Philippines (7,641), and Japan (14,125), with Taiwan situated between the latter two.

Located 65 nautical miles from the mainland (2), Taiwan is the largest of the islands over which the Nationalist Republic of *China* (ROC) has maintained jurisdiction since 1949. Its government then moved there under pressure from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and following the proclamation, on October 1, of the People's Republic of China on the mainland. Taiwan occupies a strategic position, equidistant (1,700 nautical miles) from the Strait of Malacca, the gateway to the Indian Ocean, and the Strait of La Pérouse north of Japan. The Peking authorities, who seek to take control of Taiwan by any means necessary, have never exercised sovereignty over Taiwan or any of the other islands currently administered by the Republic of China.

(1) The Korean Peninsula consists of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea north of the 38th parallel and the Republic of Korea to the south. They are separated by an impassable demilitarized zone (DMZ), which effectively makes South Korea a geopolitical island.
(2) That is 120 kilometers (1 nautical mile = 1.852 km).

**Figure 2 • The main straits of the Pacific coastal seas**


The "first island chain" is a geostrategic term referring to the group of islands bordering the South China Sea, the East China Sea, and the Yellow Sea. It constitutes a potential "cangue" - a heavy wooden collar that was fastened in China around a condemned person's neck and wrists - on the People's Republic of China should the straits separating these islands be closed. Due to its geographical location, topography, and the bathymetry of the waters surrounding it, Taiwan is both the potential lock and the pivot of this chain. Conversely, if brought under PRC control, the first chain of islands would serve as an advanced line of defense for continental powers against a U.S. and allied expeditionary force coming from the Pacific, as well as a potentially highly effective Anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) component.

The looming confrontation is, as it has always been, one of the fundamental oppositions between land and sea, between the Behemoth and the Leviathan **(1)**. In this case, it is the powers of the land clashing with those of the sea—two groups of countries that are, for the most part, technologically advanced. On one side are the three coastal nuclear autocracies, the Behemoth, united by their totalitarian ideologies and possessing significant and complementary economic and military forces. On the other side is the Leviathan, symbolizing the group of democracies led by the United States of America and three countries with which it shares strong military alliances. U.S. forces are stationed on their territories and, together with their own, form a proven maritime power. These are Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines. And, of course, Taiwan, which, as the main stake in the conflict, faces a constant and imminent threat from the PRC.

**(1)** Carl Schmitt notes that according to the interpretations of medieval Kabbalists, world history is a battle between the mighty whale, the Leviathan, and the no less powerful Behemoth, a land animal imagined in the likeness of an elephant or a bull. According to Kabbalah, Behemoth tries to tear Leviathan apart with its horns and teeth, while Leviathan strives to block, using its fins, the land creature's mouth and nose to starve and suffocate it (see *"Land and Sea: A Perspective on World History"* [1942], Paris, Le Labyrinthe, 1985).

A major war scenario may not be the most likely outcome, given the time required to deploy forces and the unpredictability of geopolitical decision-making in democracies. However, a rapid takeover of the island of Taiwan through a surprise operation to overwhelm its defenses is possible, building on the tactics refined during the attacks on islands near the mainland in 1949 and 1950. It could initially be carried out by thousands of fishing boats and the Chinese Maritime Militia, transporting troops and drones, followed by a large-scale amphibious operation led by the People's Liberation Army Navy's (PLAN-M) force projection and power projection vessels, which would exploit the initially captured beachheads. The chances of success for such an operation are not insignificant, given that, since 2022, Chinese forces have regularly approached the Taiwanese coast to conduct exercises without provoking a violent reaction from the forces of the Republic of China. To prevent this, it would be necessary to thwart the success of the first phase. Does Taiwan currently possess sufficient means—in both quality and quantity—to do so? Whatever the outcome of this maneuver, would it bring the conflict to an end, or would it escalate into a devastating showdown between the Behemoth and the Leviathan? More elaborate and taking longer to implement and yield results, a blockade of the nearby seas would have direct consequences for the economies of both the Leviathan countries and the PRC. This would prompt retaliatory measures from democracies, with the risk of triggering a full-scale war.

In any case, given the capabilities of the military forces involved, the significant continental air threat, and the maritime surveillance capabilities available to both sides, submarines would play a key role on both sides. Thanks to their stealth capabilities, they would conduct reconnaissance and covert intelligence-gathering operations, as well as tracking and, if necessary, mining and destroying enemy submarines. To ensure the capture or retention of major straits, they would conduct commando landings on islands located on either side of the main chokepoints in preparation for amphibious operations.

Since Deng Xiaoping decided to turn the People's Republic of China into a thalassocracy by developing its economy through maritime trade, Taiwan and the straits surrounding it have taken on paramount geostrategic importance. Located on the major circumnavigation route, the Republic of China sees maritime traffic passing along its coasts—particularly through the Taiwan Strait—that supplies the major economic powers, which are primarily itself, Singapore, Japan, and the Republic of Korea. The Taiwan Strait, which separates the island from mainland China, also carries the massive trade flows between the major commercial ports, all located in the seas bordering the Pacific Ocean, from which they are separated by the first chain of islands. The same applies to the bases of the PLA-N, whose vessels are forced to pass through straits that could be blocked in the event of a conflict.

Initially, Mao Zedong sought to continue his formidable land advance by storming the islands where nationalist forces, routed on the mainland, had taken refuge. Lacking a sufficiently organized and powerful navy, he did so by developing a strategy that utilized requisitioned or chartered fishing boats. After an initial defeat, this *modus operandi* proved effective until demonstrations of American naval power rendered it ineffective.

His successors, and in particular Xi Jinping starting in 2013, subsequently decided to build a combat fleet second to none, capable of supporting China's commercial and political interests overseas as well as in its nearby seas. To do so, it must be able to control the straits surrounding Taiwan (the Taiwan Strait, which connects the South China Sea to the East China Sea, as well as the Bashi and Miyako Straits, which allow submarines to pass submerged into the Pacific Ocean). In all three cases, the goal is to break through the barrier that Taiwan represents.

China, whose only ally is North Korea—with which it fought the Korean War—has found a valuable partner in the Russian Federation. Drawing on its military experience gained during the Cold War and supplemented by insights gathered during the subsequent period of openness, Russia helps address some of the shortcomings of the other two autocracies in the areas of high-tech military weaponry and tactics across various domains of naval warfare. These ties reinforced by their geographical and ideological proximity—though differing in nature on the military front—bring these three complementary nuclear autocracies closer together. Except that the weight of the past remains. While history does not allow us to predict the future, it sheds light on it. Russia's advance to the Pacific came at China's expense during "the century of humiliation." This significant portion of Siberia lost by China is even more indispensable to the Russian navy today than in the past because it provides access to the straits connecting the adjacent seas and also because it will soon allow for year-round connectivity between the Pacific and Atlantic oceans via the Northeast Arctic Route. This route, which is claimed by both states for economic reasons—and by Russia for territorial reasons as well—is a potential source of discord. This route—which is permanently open to submerged nuclear submarines—held strategic importance by connecting the Soviet strongholds in the Sea of Okhotsk and the Barents Sea. It has retained this importance as long as Russia maintains control of the Bering Strait and the Arctic, allowing it to discreetly move its submarine forces from one theater to another as needed.

# The Geostrategic Importance of the Straits Near Taiwan

The coasts of Taiwan are flanked by the major circumnavigation route. Located in the Northern Hemisphere, where all the major economic powers are concentrated, this heavily trafficked sea lane has made it possible to circumnavigate the globe since the opening of the Panama and Suez Canals. A ship heading east from the Strait of Malacca crosses the South China Sea and then the East China Sea, passing near the PRC and Taiwan, before skirting the Japanese archipelago. It then crosses the Pacific Ocean along a great circle route that takes it near the west coast of the United States, before passing through the Panama Canal, which leads it into the Caribbean Sea near the Gulf of Mexico, and then into the Atlantic, off the U.S. East Coast. The ship then successively crosses the Strait of Gibraltar and the Mediterranean Sea, sailing along the southern coast of Europe. It then enters the Suez Canal, crosses the Red Sea along the coast of Saudi Arabia, passes through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait—the most dangerous stretch of its journey, where Somali pirates and Yemeni Houthi militants are active—before passing near India and heading toward the Strait of Malacca, the busiest in the world. It is through this major circumnavigation route that the bulk of trade between the wealthiest nations passes. It is these maritime routes of globalization that enabled the PRC to develop economically beginning in 1978, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping. Formosa, the alternative name for Taiwan that fell out of use at the end of the Cold War, is surrounded by several straits, some of which are of paramount strategic importance (1). This is particularly true of the Taiwan Strait, which connects the East and South China Seas, as well as the Miyako Strait and the Bashi Channel, which link these seas to the Pacific Ocean. This makes the island a strategic location from which it is possible to influence vital maritime traffic serving not only China's major ports, but also other major economies such as the Republic of Korea and Japan. In addition to the shipping lanes that follow the major circumnavigation route (2), there are those that take the maritime route connecting Asia to Europe via the Bering Strait and then through one of the Arctic routes—the Transpolar or Northeast Passage. Set to develop commercially as the ice melts due to global warming (3), these routes strategically connect, when open to navigation, the Russian Pacific bases (Vladivostok and Rybachiy on the Kamchatka Peninsula) to those of the Northern Fleet in the Barents Sea. Ever since the U.S. submarine USS Nautilus demonstrated this capability in 1958, these waters have remained accessible year-round to nuclear-powered submarines, which can navigate undetected beneath the Arctic Ocean's sea ice (4).

## The PLA's struggle to seize the islands of the Republic of China: The emergence of a new maritime modus operandi

The Chinese Civil War came to an end when Chiang Kai-shek was forced to board every available ship to retreat with his troops to a few islands, the most important of which were Hainan and Formosa (Taiwan). Following Mao's triumphant announcement of the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in Tiananmen Square on 10 October 1949, Communist China, which by then controlled the entire mainland, turned its attention to the sea in an attempt to conquer the islands still held by Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang (KMT) **(Figure 3)**.

**The first attack was on Jinmen Island on October 25 and 27, 1949** • It was a bitter defeat for the People's Liberation Army (PLA). It was the inability to capture this small fortified island (also known as Quemoy), located just 5.5 nautical miles (10 kilometers) from Fujian Province, that derailed Mao's initial plans to invade Taiwan, thus marking the beginning of the stalemate that persists to this day between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait. The 20,000 men of the Communist assault troops, lacking sufficient fishing vessels to transport them in a single wave, were crushed on the beach by Nationalist troops, their air force, and fire from their warships. 5,000 of the 9,000 men who landed were killed, and all the others were taken prisoner. None of the 350 boats available in the region survived, which prevented the PLA from reinforcing the first wave. This disastrous assault deeply shook Mao and the high command, making them realize the unique challenges and difficulties of conducting naval battles and amphibious operations. This operation still has profound repercussions today: it is a classic case study that Chinese academics and strategists continue to debate in preparation for a future war against Taiwan (5).

(1) It was the Portuguese who, in the sixteenth century, named the island *"Ilha Formosa,"* the "Beautiful Island."
(2) It should be noted that for this route, the closure of the strait can be easily bypassed by sailing east of the island.
(3) Unable to use it in 1905, a period when it was blocked by ice, the Russian Baltic Fleet had to sail around Europe, Africa, and Asia for months to reach the Sea of Japan, where, exhausted, it was crushed by Admiral Togo's Japanese fleet in the Strait of Tsushima.
(4) W. Anderson, *Nautilus 90° North*, Arthaud, 1960.
(5) Toshi Yoshihara, *Mao's Army Goes to Sea: The Island Campaigns and the Founding of China's Navy*, Georgetown University Press, 2022.

**Figure 3 • The struggle for the Islands, 1949–1950**


**March 5—May 1, 1950, Hainan Island** • Hainan Island was attacked and captured by the 4th Field Army, which carried out the PLA's first large-scale amphibious operation for this purpose. Lessons from the previous failure were quickly learned and incorporated into the planning of the assault on this island, which is comparable in size to Taiwan. It was thus planned that, to successfully cross the 10.7-nautical-mile-wide (20 kilometers) Hainan Strait, sufficient maritime resources would be required to transport at least fifty thousand soldiers, each carrying three days' worth of rations. Preparations for the amphibious operation began on March 5 with the sorting out of logistical details. Like the 3rd Field Army in Jinmen and for the same reasons, the 4th faced a severe shortage of boats. During their retreat from the mainland to Taiwan, the Nationalist forces sent all seaworthy ocean-going vessels to Formosa and destroyed the rest. It was therefore necessary to recover all available boats, even though many local fishermen, opposed to the Communist regime, had hidden or scuttled their own. Thus, when the Communist forces sought to requisition seaworthy boats, they encountered strong resistance from the local population. The problem was solved in a pragmatic way by offering residents the opportunity to rent out their boats, thereby refining the modus operandi of using a large number of small civilian vessels to overwhelm the maritime and coastal defenses. This method made it possible to gather approximately six hundred vessels within a month's time, to which were added all those that the assault forces found and requisitioned in the recently conquered territories. Within three months, the communists mobilized four thousand sailors and approximately two thousand vessels, enabling a massive troop landing with the support of a strong contingent of guerrillas who had been present on the island since the 1920s. After a series of nighttime infiltration, PLA forces launched the main assault on April 16, followed by a second wave on the 23rd. By May[1], the Communists had taken control of the entire island of Hainan. The Republic of China Navy was able to evacuate 50,000 men to Taiwan, leaving their heavy equipment behind.

**From May 25 to August 4, 1950, the Wanshan Archipelago** • Occupied by nationalist forces, the Wanshan Archipelago was the site of the PLA's first naval engagements and its first joint military operation[1]. Located off the coast of Hong Kong, the 48 islands that make up the archipelago stretch out from the Pearl River estuary and flank the main entrance to the major port of Guangzhou (Canton). During the 75 days of fighting, Communist forces sank four warships, damaged eleven vessels, and captured an equal number. They captured 200 men and killed another 700. Although in this case, it was not a strait in the strict sense of the word, the operations were primarily maritime. Their main objective was to clear the way to an important economic hub.

(1) The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) was established in May 1950.

## The Involvement of the United States and the effectiveness of sea power display

**Withdrawal** • On January 5, 1950, President Harry S. Truman declared that the United States had no predatory designs on Formosa, or on any other Chinese territory, that it had no intention of using its armed forces to interfere in the current situation in China, nor of providing military aid or advice to the Chinese forces in Formosa. The Republic of China, which enjoyed a relative respite after the Jinmen incident, was nonetheless in a critical situation. It was saved by North Korea's invasion on June 25, 1950, the desperate situation of the under-equipped South Korean forces, and the weakness of the American contingent which was completely caught off guard.

**The U-turn** • Two days later, President Truman did indeed make a U-turn on the Taiwan issue: "I have ordered the U.S. Seventh Fleet in the Pacific to prevent any attack on Formosa. As a corollary to this action, I ask the Chinese government in Formosa to cease all air and naval operations against the Chinese mainland. The U.S. Seventh Fleet in the Pacific will ensure that these orders are carried out. Any decision regarding the future status of Formosa must await the restoration of security in the Pacific, a peace treaty with Japan, or a decision by the United Nations."

The *status quo* in China remained unchanged throughout the Korean War until the armistice was signed on July 27, 1953. However, the new president, Dwight D. Eisenhower, elected in 1952, put an end to the policy of containing Taiwan. On December 2, 1954, the Mutual Defense Treaty between the United States of America and the Republic of China was signed with Taiwan[1]. It did not enter into force until March 3, 1955, and remained in effect until it was replaced by the *Taiwan Relations Act* on January 1, 1979. Crises in the Taiwan Strait, 65 nautical miles (120 kilometers) wide, would follow one after another during these decades, with threats from the PRC escalating in tandem with the growing strength of the PLA, whose navy was continuously expanding.

**The first Taiwan Strait crisis** • It began on September 3, 1954, and ended on May 1, 1955. The Republic of China's military began reinforcing its forces on the islands of Jinmen and Matsu, near the mainland. In September 1954, the People's Republic of China shelled the islands. Two American advisers present on Jinmen were killed. The Dachen Islands fell on February 26, 1955. The U.S. fleet limited itself to protecting the evacuation of the islands. On January 29, 1955, the Formosa Resolution was approved by the U.S. Congress, authorizing Eisenhower to use the armed forces to defend Taiwan. In March 1955, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles raised the possibility of stronger U.S. intervention, potentially including the use of nuclear weapons. On April 23, 1955, the PRC declared itself ready to negotiate, and on May 1, a ceasefire was signed between the two sides. The U.S. policy of walking a tightrope on nuclear matters undoubtedly forced the People's Republic of China to end its aggression, but it also prompted Mao to launch China's nuclear program to protect the country against such intimidation in the future. PLA forces, however, took control of the Dachen Islands, the Nationalist-held islands closest to the major port of Shanghai at the mouth of the Yangtze River.

**The Second Taiwan Strait Crisis** • It took place from August 23 to December 2, 1958, with even higher stakes. It was marked by bloody naval and amphibious operations, a significant deployment of U.S. forces to Taiwan, and the threat of Soviet intervention. Once again, the Republic of China fortified its installations on Jinmen and Matsu, and the PRC resumed shelling these islands (the shelling continued intermittently until 1979). The PLA-N attempted to seize territories controlled by the Republic of China by launching an amphibious landing on Dongding, the southernmost island of the Jinmen Archipelago, on August 24 and 25, 1958. The landing force was repelled, but this event marked a significant escalation compared to the previous crisis. President Eisenhower ordered the reinforcement of the Seventh Fleet and the protection of ships beyond 12 nautical miles from the islands. During the aerial combat, 25 MiGs were shot down by Taiwanese F-86s armed with Sidewinder missiles. This highly advanced air-to-air weaponry was then used in combat for the first time. The PRC's fundamental interests were in conflict: it wanted both to defeat the Republic of China and to avoid direct conflict with the more powerful U.S. forces. This risk of escalation led to a stalemate.

**The Third Taiwan Strait Crisis** • Thirty-eight years later, from July 21, 1995, to March 23, 1996), the Republic of China (ROC) was no longer an existential threat to the People's Republic of China (PRC). Rather than military actions, it was the challenge to the political *status quo* by ROC President Lee Teng-hui that triggered the crisis. As the first Taiwanese president permitted to visit the United States since that country recognized the People's Republic of China in 1979, he delivered a speech there in which he stated that "Taiwan is a country with independent sovereignty." In response, the PLA fired missiles into waters north and west of Taiwan; the PLA Navy and amphibious forces gathered near the Taiwan Strait, and the PLA Air Force conducted flights near the island. With the PRC's true intentions unclear, the United States responds by demonstrating its naval power. The *U.S. Navy* sent two carrier strike groups toward Taiwan. They transited the strait along with amphibious ships. After a brief lull, the crisis flares up again in early 1996, as Taiwan's first free and open presidential election approaches. To dissuade the island's voters from electing Lee, the

(1) The treaty's application was, however, limited to the defense of only the islands of Taiwan and the Pescadores, excluding the other islands held by the Republic of China.

PRC concentrated nearly 100,000 troops along the strait to conduct exercises there. More missiles were fired, falling between 30 and 50 kilometers from Keelung and Kaohsiung, two of Taiwan's main ports, thereby disrupting commercial maritime traffic.

In the end, no fighting took place. Lee was elected by a large majority, which strengthened Taiwan's sovereignty. Although the United States no longer has any formal obligation to defend Taiwan, maintaining stability in relations across the Taiwan Strait remains such a critical issue that the United States is prepared to risk war. Once again, recognizing its military inferiority, the PRC is forced to avoid conflict with U.S. forces. It chooses to continue developing its own forces, prioritizing the navy. Well balanced, the PLA-N has sought to equip itself with vessels capable of conducting all types of naval warfare. It has possessed nuclear weapons since 1964 (the A-bomb) and, more importantly, the H-bomb since 1967. Since 2016, the PLA Navy has had a larger number of vessels than *the U.S. Navy*, albeit with lower tonnage. The experience of the Taiwan crises has shown it the importance of aircraft carriers capable of projecting power anywhere in the world **(1)**. As a result, it has gradually implemented an effective program aimed at acquiring domestically designed aircraft carriers of the STOBAR (short takeoff but arrested recovery) and CATOBAR (catapult-assisted takeoff but arrested recovery) types, as well as the aircraft capable of operating from them. All the while maintaining the U.S. Navy as its primary benchmark.

## The Taiwan Strait: A Major Economic and Strategic Passage Today

Taiwan is separated from mainland China by the wide strait of the same name, which the PRC claims by including it within its "nine-dash line" **(2)**. It is 210 nautical miles long and 65 nautical miles (120 kilometers) wide at its narrowest point **(3)**. It is the northern part of the South China Sea. The Pescadores Islands (Penghu in China), located 74 nautical miles from Jinmen and 24 nautical miles from Taiwan, are in the strait. These are the only islands considered by the United States to be part of the Republic of China, both in the 1955 agreement (*Sino-American Mutual Defense Treaty)* and in the 1979 act that replaced it (*Taiwan Relations Act)*.

Economically speaking, this strait lies along the major circumnavigation route. It is the primary shipping lane for vessels departing from China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan heading west, transporting goods from Asian industrial hubs to markets in Europe, the United States, and elsewhere. According to data compiled by Bloomberg, 48% of the global container fleet and 88% of the world's largest ships by tonnage used this waterway in 2022. On average, 240 ships per day pass through the Taiwan Strait or sail along the island's east coast **(4)**. In addition, there is coastal traffic, fishing boats, and activities by ships of the People's Liberation Army Navy. Strategically, its bathymetry is unfavorable for submarine navigation, with depths often less than 50 meters. For the same reason, however, it is very well suited for mine warfare.

Although the People's Liberation Army has largely respected it, the PRC has never officially recognized—outside of times of crisis—the median line of the Taiwan Strait as a de facto maritime boundary. This line, which an American general drew in 1954 at the height of Cold War hostilities between Communist China and Taiwan, is recognized by the United States. It is represented by a straight line drawn midway between the two shores of the strait. As part of the measures taken by Beijing to protest the visit to Taipei in early August 2022 by U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, this is no longer the case. Since then, the Taiwan Strait has been in a state of constant crisis. Most vessels in the Chinese Maritime Militia turn off their Automatic Identification System (AIS) when sailing in this area in order to remain covert.

Taipei, which complies with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which entered into force in 1994, cannot be a signatory due to its lack of statehood. Washington complies with the letter of UNCLOS but has not signed it. Beijing, which has signed and ratified it, does not apply it in the strait, where the PRC considers that foreign warships may only navigate with its consent. That is why, for years, the U.S. Navy has been conducting freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) every three or four months, which involve sailing through the strait and the part of the South China Sea over which China claims sovereignty without prior notice. It has been doing so systematically since 2017. Ships from most major navies—including France's—do the same. An increasing number are doing so despite sometimes dangerous maneuvers by Chinese vessels and the resulting risk of collision.

**(1)** Hugues Eudeline, *The Genesis and Role of Aircraft Carriers in China's Geopolitics*, Thomas More Institute, May 2023, available here.
**(2)** Drawing on work published in 1947 by a Kuomintang geographer under the title "Map of the Islands of the South China Sea," the PRC delineated them in 2009 using the nine-dash line and justified its claims through a so-called historical right that is not recognized by the Montego Bay Convention. These waters encompass more than 62% of the South China Sea and include the Spratly and Paracel archipelagos, as well as Taiwan and the strait of the same name.
**(3)** By way of comparison, the width of the Strait of Dover is 17 nautical miles (31.5 kilometers) and that of the Strait of Gibraltar is 7.3 nautical miles (13.8 kilometers).
**(4)** Kevin Varley, "Taiwan Tensions Raise Risks in One of Busiest Shipping Lanes", Bloomberg, August 2, 2022, available here.

On September 25, 2024, a Japanese vessel, the destroyer *Sazanami*, participated in one of these FONOPs for the first time since World War II. It was accompanied by an Australian ship and a New Zealand ship. Japan repeated the operation on three further occasions, in February 2025 and June 2025. It did so by gradually shifting its posture, moving from a joint passage with allied vessels to an independent transit—a development viewed by the PLA-N as a sign of growing pressure from the Japanese government. The Chinese, in their traditional analysis of the symbolism of events, reacted to the fourth transit carried out on April 17, 2026, by the Japanese Self-Defense Forces destroyer *Ikazuchi*. This date is, in fact, the anniversary of a particularly humiliating event for China, when, on April 17, 1895, the Qing Empire was forced to sign the unequal Treaty of Shimonoseki, which ended the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895. Under this agreement, China ceded Taiwan (Formosa) and the Penghu Islands (Pescadores) to Japan. The PRC viewed this move as a show of force fully in line with the statement by Japan's new Prime Minister, Sanae Takaichi, who was elected on October 25, 2025. Six months earlier, she had traveled to Taipei to promote "strategic cooperation in the face of common defense challenges." She had also stated in an interview with the Hudson Institute that "peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait are of vital interest to Japan," thereby interfering in what China considers to be its internal affairs.

China responded two days later by sending a surface combat group to cross the first chain of islands through the 28-nautical-mile-wide Yokoate Strait, without entering Japanese territorial waters (12 nautical miles on either side of the Japanese islands of Yokoate and Amami). Led by the Type 052D destroyer *Baotou*, the group sailed from the East China Sea to the Pacific, where it conducted exercises. This passage through an unusual and relatively narrow point demonstrates China's efforts to survey the straits of the first island chain located in the Japanese archipelago.

During the first three Taiwan Strait crises, China was forced to back down in the face of the power projection capability represented by the presence of U.S. aircraft carriers off its coast. It viewed these shows of force as humiliating setbacks, as a loss of face. So, it sought to symbolically compensate for them by ensuring that each of its newly commissioned aircraft carriers crossed the Taiwan Strait only when fully operational, with its entire air wing on board and accompanied by its escort. The *Liaoning* crossed the Taiwan Strait on January 4, 2018, the *Shandong* on November 17, 2019, and the Fujian on September 12, 2025.

## The Bashi and Miyako Straits

The Luzon Strait separates the Philippines from Taiwan. It is a major sea lane connecting the South China Sea to the Pacific Ocean. 160 nautical miles wide, it includes in its center the ten small Batanes Islands, under Philippine jurisdiction. They form three passageways of varying importance. The northernmost, the Bashi Channel, is bordered to the north by Taiwan and to the south by Y'Ami Island. It is the widest (70 nautical miles) and deepest stretch of water. It is by far the best suited for safe submarine navigation, which gives it major strategic importance **(1)**. Further south, the Batanes archipelago is separated from the Babuyan Islands by the Balintang Channel, which is 40 nautical miles wide; its seabed is more rugged and shallower, but it could nevertheless be suitable for underwater navigation. Finally, the Bashi Channel is also particularly important for communication networks. Numerous undersea communication cables that transmit internet data and telephone traffic between Asian countries pass through this channel, making it a focal point for potential disruptions to digital connections in the event of a conflict.

Located northeast of Taiwan, the Miyako Strait provides a passage from the East China Sea to the Pacific Ocean. 118 nautical miles (220 kilometers) wide, it stretches between the Japanese islands of Miyako and Okinawa. It serves as an international maritime and air corridor through Japan's exclusive economic zone. Since 2010, its use has become widespread as the People's Liberation Army's naval and air forces have increased their capabilities. This strait is wide enough to be considered an international waterway

In April 2010, eight Chinese naval surface vessels and two submarines (likely on the surface) passed near the main island of Okinawa before taking part in an exercise in the Pacific Ocean. On June 8, 2011, eleven Chinese warships transited the area; this was the largest number ever recorded to have done so, which then raised concerns among Japanese defense officials. On November 26, 2015, Chinese aircraft—eight bombers and three reconnaissance planes—flew near Miyako and Okinawa without violating Japanese airspace. The aircraft included several types, including H-6K bombers capable of carrying nuclear weapons. On September 25, 2016, more than forty PLA Air Force aircraft crossed the Miyako Strait. They continued on toward the Western Pacific. On July 12, 2017, the Japanese Ministry of Defense issued a statement describing the overflight earlier that day by a

**(1)** To navigate safely while submerged, a submarine must maintain a safety margin from the seabed to avoid the risk of grounding, as well as a margin above its hull to avoid the risk of collision with a surface vessel. During operations, these margins may be reduced, at the commander's discretion and depending on his skill, to approach the coast or traverse shallow straits. To navigate safely while submerged, a submarine must maintain a safety margin from the seabed to avoid the risk of grounding, as well as a margin above its hull to avoid the risk of collision with a surface vessel. During operations, these margins may be reduced, at the commander's discretion and depending on his skill, to approach the coast or traverse shallow straits.

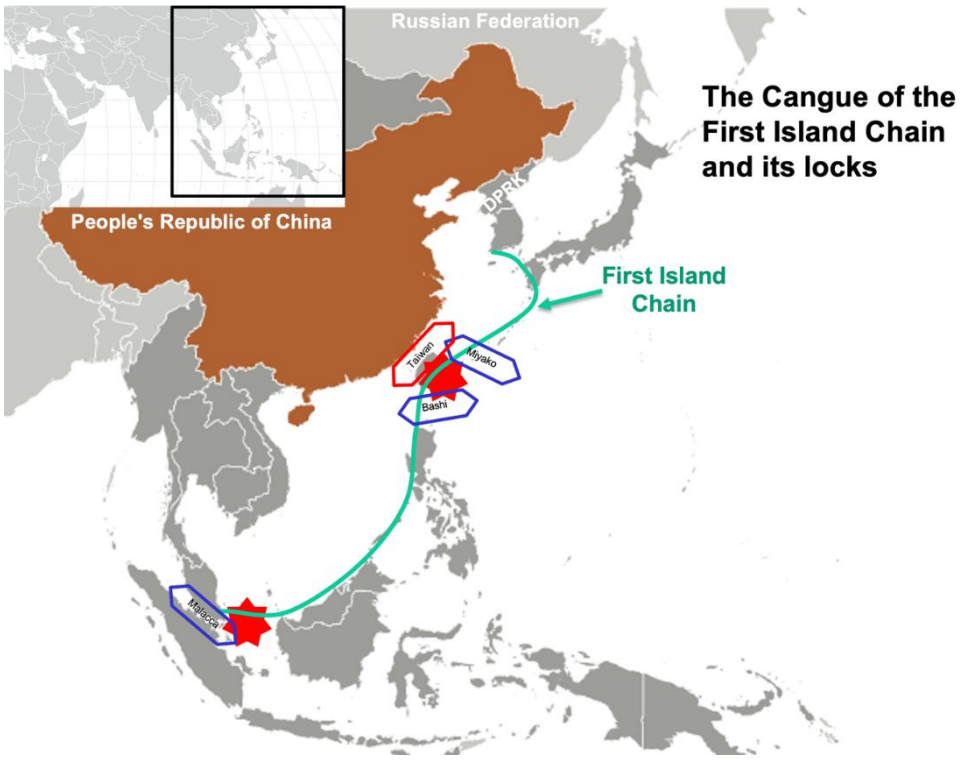
formation of six Xian H-6 bombers as "unusual." China responded to Japan that it should "get used to it." On April 12, 2020, the aircraft carrier Liaoning and the five warships accompanying it crossed the Miyako Strait, heading south and then passing east of Taiwan.

The Taiwan Strait is one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world. It serves as a vital hub for the global shipping, logistics, and financial networks. The flow from the Indian Ocean splits into two, with one branch entering the strait toward the ports of the South China Sea, the Yellow Sea, and the Sea of Japan, while the other, smaller branch passes through the Bashi Channel, south of Taiwan, before heading toward the Pacific and Arctic Oceans. With the increasing number of PLA show-of-force exercises, the region is now more vulnerable to an escalation of the conflict.

## Taiwan, the central lock of the cangue of the first island chain

The first island chain is a group of Pacific archipelagos comprising U.S. allies and partners, notably Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines, which can be extended as far as Singapore, the outlet of the Strait of Malacca. This vital chokepoint, the busiest in the world, provides access to a series of seas connected by straits. Together with Taiwan, located 1,700 nautical miles further north, it constitutes one of the two main potential locks (chokepoints) in this strategic line of defense aimed at containing China's maritime expansion **(Figure 4)**.

**Figure 4 • The First Island Chain and Its locks**



On November 23, 2003, and again in an article published in January 2004 in the *Wen Wei Po* newspaper, the President of the People's Republic of China, Hu Jintao, noted that the Strait of Malacca was the center of gravity for China's development. He named this threat as the "Malacca Dilemma." It was then—and remains today—the main transit point for imports of raw materials and energy that fuel Chinese industries located in the hinterlands of its massive ports, as well as for the manufactured goods with which China floods the world in return. Its closure would jeopardize the country's stability, economically (slower growth), socially (threat to domestic peace), and politically (challenge to the Chinese Communist Party's legitimacy). It would act as a brake on the "Chinese Dream" project **(1)**.

## Protecting China's oceanic nuclear deterrent

A simple glance at a nautical chart of the South China Sea, into which the Strait of Malacca flows, reveals that it is the only sea near the PRC that is deep and vast enough to allow for the operational deployment of its ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs). Provided they remain effectively undetectable, they constitute the primary—if not the sole—second-strike capability in the event of a nuclear attack on China. The approach adopted since the end of the Cold War by all nations operating highly stealthy strategic submarines involves moving into vast oceanic expanses where they can "blend in," making their detection unlikely. This is not currently possible for China. Its submarine forces are confined to its nearby seas, where the lack of space can be offset by naval, air, and underwater surveillance protections within a "bastion" **(2)**.

This is an area similar to what the USSR had established in the Barents Sea and the Sea of Okhotsk **(Figure 2)**—and this continued until the end of the Cold War—after learning from its American spies (particularly those of the Walker family) that, due to their lack of stealth, Soviet SSBNs were being tracked by allied ASW vessels without the Soviets being able to counter-detect them. This tactical choice by the Soviets did not allow them to compensate for the technical inferiority of their submarines, and the same would likely be true today for the Chinese.

It is likely that China's underwater warfare technology will improve thanks to their research, development, and innovation capabilities, particularly with Russia's assistance. The quality of Russia's submarines has improved significantly since it gained access to Western industrial technology following the fall of the Berlin Wall. Today, its submarine force is the most effective branch of its navy. However, countries that build submarines are reluctant to share their expertise in this field, even among allies. It is highly likely that China is leveraging its support for Russia in the war against Ukraine to secure military aid. What China lacks most in the maritime domain is undoubtedly submarine technology. Russia is reportedly already doing so with North Korea, its only true defense ally, which has provided troops to fight in Ukraine. In exchange, Russia is said to be helping North Korea develop nuclear-powered submarines. According to various sources, *the Ursa Major*, a Russian ship carrying weapons systems that sank in the Mediterranean off Cartagena in December 2024, was reportedly transporting components for naval reactors intended for North Korea. China, which is a partner of Russia but not its ally, participates with Russia in frequent exercises and long-range deployments of increasing complexity, ranging from the Baltic to the Bering Sea, as well as in the Sea of Japan and the Pacific. Having never experienced high-intensity naval combat, it benefits from the expertise Russia acquired during the Cold War.

The capture of Hainan in 1950 gave the PRC a dominant position in the South China Sea. Today, the Yulin naval base, located in the south of the island, is the home port of China's first true aircraft carrier, the *Fujian*, as well as the *Shandong*, the first aircraft carrier built entirely domestically. The operational base for China's ballistic missile submarines is also located on the island, in Sanya. This base is ideally suited to its purpose due to its immediate proximity to the deep waters of the South China Sea. The submarines can dive there less than three hours after setting sail to begin patrolling.

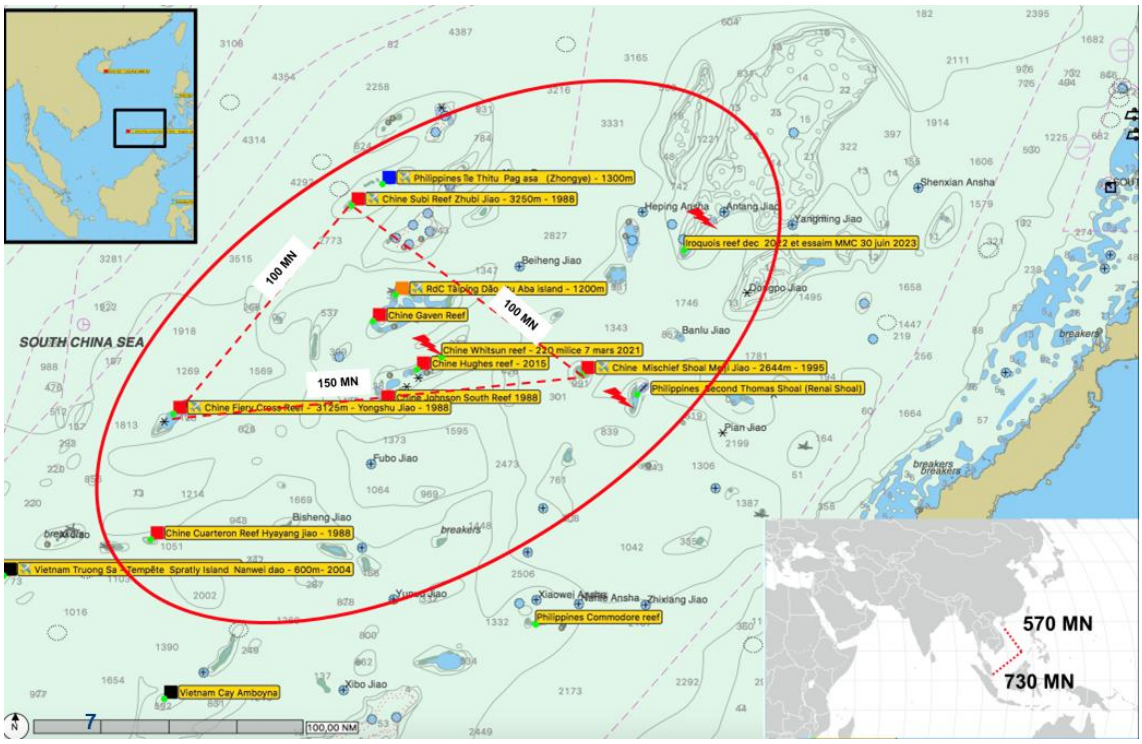
They can access the Pacific Ocean via deep-sea diving through the Luzon Strait, specifically the Bashi Channel, which is the widest (84 nautical miles) and deepest of the channels connecting the South China Sea to the Pacific Ocean. However, it has the major drawback of running along the southern coast of Taiwan, in an area where underwater detection capabilities are likely to be extensive. The PRC continues to deploy bottom-mounted very-low-frequency hydrophone arrays designed to detect submarines at long range. The effectiveness of these systems is likely compromised by the high level of noise from commercial traffic in the area.

**(1)** This is nothing less than a return to a leading role in the international community to once again become the "center of the world," the literal meaning of its name in Mandarin.
**(2)** The latest Chinese missiles deployed on SSBNs (JL-3) are reported to have a range exceeding 10,000 kilometers, which would allow them to reach the west coast of the United States from the South China Sea. This "bastion" is heavily defended by acoustic surveillance networks, attack submarines, surface ships, and air assets deployed from the Chinese naval air complex located there.

The bastion—and more broadly the South China Sea—is protected by strategic outposts that the PRC has gradually built after seizing some of the Spratleys Islands from Vietnam and the Philippines and occupying the entire Paracel Islands archipelago. It has also taken control of several shoals in the Spratleys, which it has reclaimed and which, together, constitute a powerful air and naval complex **(Figure 5)**. centered around three 3,000-meter-long airstrips located at Subi Reef, Fiery Cross Reef, and Mischief Reef. Each is at the apex of an isosceles triangle with sides measuring 200 and 150 nautical miles, respectively. They are close enough to serve as mutual backup airfields. Runways of this size would be enough to host China's largest military transport aircraft and strategic bombers, along with all smaller aircraft. With its ports, the complex can support naval assets.

China's military presence continues to expand in the South China Sea. Beijing began major dredging at Antelope Reef in October 2025, and in recent weeks has begun preliminary construction on some areas of the reef. Based on the dimensions of the reef and the areas reclaimed so far, there could be sufficient space to host a runway of 3,000 meters in length. Antelope Reef lies within the Crescent island group in the southwestern part of the Paracels. It is located approximately 162 nautical miles from Sanya Port in China's Hainan province and 216 nautical miles from Da Nang, Vietnam.

**Figure 5 • Chinese Naval-air Complex in the Spratlys** (September 2024)




Fond de carte South China Sea ENCs et données de l'auteur.

## Chinese assets designed to break the cangue of the first island chain

Furthermore, since this naval-air complex is located near the geographic center of the South China Sea, the aircraft deployed there—depending on their type (maritime patrol, fighters, bombers, etc.), can participate in the anti-submarine protection of the bastion and operate without in-flight refueling across all the straits of the first island chain that provide access to China's maritime approaches. All other PLA-N bases (with the notable exception of Djibouti) are located on the Chinese mainland, which requires its naval forces to cross the straits of the first island chain to reach the open ocean. Despite its diplomatic efforts and attempts to influence the Pacific island states, the PRC has not succeeded in establishing a lasting presence there.

In the event of a conflict, the PLA's need for power projection and military strength in and from the Pacific justify the importance it places on its aircraft carrier program, which it has carried out with remarkable efficiency. Lacking a partner to assist in its construction, it purchased an aircraft carrier under construction from Ukraine, reverse-engineered it, completed the vessel, and commissioned it into active service as the Type 001 *Liaoning* in 2012. It then built an improved version, the Type 002 *Shandong* (operational in 2019), before designing a true aircraft carrier equipped with arresting wires and electromagnetic catapults—CATOBAR (1)—the Type 003 *Fujian*, which is expected to have a displacement of 80,000 tons (2). Beijing is currently preparing to commission its first nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, the Type 004. It is currently under construction at the Dalian Shipbuilding Industry Company. It is expected to be larger than the Type 003. It was not until 2024 that the *Liaoning* and *Shandong* conducted their first joint exercise involving both carriers in the South China Sea. The Fujian is expected to be fully operational in 2026.

At the same time, the PLA-N was developing its own carrier-based aviation with improved versions of their Russian counterparts already in service (the J-15 is the Chinese version of the *Sukhoi* Su-33). To meet the specific requirements of CATOBAR aircraft carriers, it was subsequently equipped with improved catapult-launched versions (J-15T and J-15DT) and copies of those currently deployed on U.S. aircraft carriers (F-35/J-35 fighters and Hawkeye/KJ-600 airborne early warning aircraft).

According to a Pentagon statement dated December 24, 2025, China aims to have nine aircraft carriers by 2035. This goal is realistic given the efficiency of its shipyards. Given China's limited geographic interests, which allow it to focus all its resources on the Indo-Pacific region, a fleet of nine Chinese aircraft carriers could potentially enable it to deploy more carriers simultaneously in this theater of operations than the U.S. Navy's fleet of eleven aircraft carriers deployed across all the world's oceans.

Finally, China possesses an impressive force projection capability, including four Type 075 amphibious assault ships with a displacement of 40,000 tons and the first of a new class of 50,000-ton amphibious assault ships, the *Sichuan*. This Type 076 is equipped with an electromagnetic catapult, giving it the capability to deploy drones as well as fixed-wing aircraft, effectively making it a light aircraft carrier. In addition, it has 14 large landing craft transports and 24 tank landing ships. In total, it possesses a very significant intervention capability capable of overwhelming the defenders of most of the islands bordering the straits that China would like to control in order to gain access to the ocean.

Commercial vessels can also be utilized as part of a supplementary fleet. This includes oil tankers and all dual-use vessels, particularly roll-on/roll-off (RoRo) cargo ships, ferries, and oil tankers. Following the example of the prefabricated port at Arromanches during the Normandy landings in 1944, the Chinese navy has developed *Shuiqiao-type* floating docks equipped with supports and gangways. They are designed to connect to one another, allowing auxiliary or civilian RoRo-type vessels to dock with them and unload large numbers of ground combat vehicles directly onto the beaches. They can be relocated as needed. A demonstration of three of them was conducted in March 2025 near Zhanjiang.

Amphibious operations cannot be improvised. They require personnel who are just as comfortable at sea as they are on land. That is why the APL-M created a marine corps specific to the navy, similar to the U.S. and British *marines*. It comprised 20,000 men in 2016, with the goal of increasing its strength to 100,000 men. This increase in personnel came at the expense of the Army, underscoring the importance placed on operations conducted from the sea.

Following the example of *the U.S. Navy* and its *"Navy SEAL Teams,"* the PLA-N established its own special forces unit, the "Sea Dragons." Relatively small in size (about 3,000 soldiers), the unit was created in 2002. Its official name is the 7th Brigade of the Marine Corps, commonly known as the "Dragons of the Seas" commando unit. Its primary missions consist of supporting large-scale combat operations, particularly any potential operations in the Taiwan Strait and the capture of islands in the China Seas, notably those in the first chain of islands that constitute the potential "cangue".

## The New Taiwan Strait Crises (2022–...)

These crises follow the logic of the first three (limited deployment of forces) toward the same political objective (the reunification of Taiwan). This new form of crisis differs, however, in duration, as it involves a permanent state of simmering conflict marked by overt and symbolic displays of force. The form is also different, as it takes the form of a tight blockade of Taiwan. In response to the visit to Taipei by Nancy Pelosi, then Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, on August 2, 2022, and to reciprocal visits by U.S. senators to Taiwan, China is pursuing a campaign of increasing pressure aimed at forcing Taiwan to submit politically. The

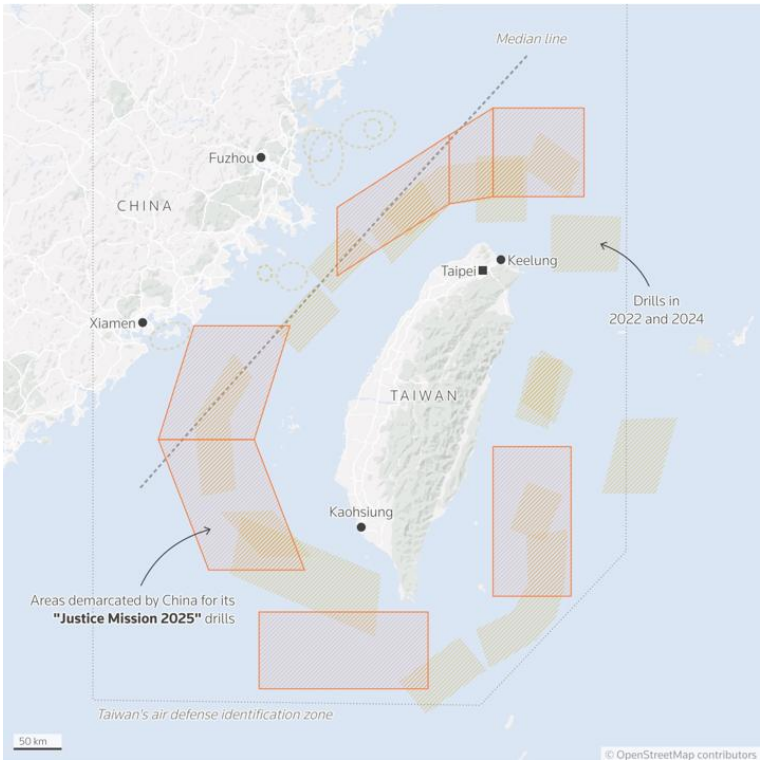
(1) *Catapult-Assisted Take-Off but Arrested Recovery*.
(2) See Hugues Eudeline, *The Origins and Role of Aircraft Carriers in China's Geopolitics, op. cit.*

PRC's immediate reaction was to announce live-fire exercises in six zones surrounding Taiwan, some of which extend to within just 9 nautical miles of the territory of the ROC. The two active-duty aircraft carriers, the *Liaoning* and the *Shandong*, as well as the Type 075 amphibious assault ship *Guangxi*, set sail, performing a symbolic show of force that is all the more striking given that the balance of power with *the U.S. Navy* in the region has tilted in favor of the PLA Navy since 2016—at least in terms of the number of vessels.

Since China has invested heavily in land-based, long-range hypersonic anti-ship missiles designed to keep the U.S. Navy at bay, the United States has not sent any aircraft carriers through the strait since 2007. Therefore, its response on August 28, 2022, this time consisted of sending two Ticonderoga-class cruisers, the USS Antietam and the USS Chancellorsville, through the Taiwan Strait. They announced they were conducting a "routine [...] transit in waters where freedom of navigation and overflight applies in accordance with international norms." The two ships transited "a corridor in the Taiwan Strait that lies beyond the territorial waters of any coastal state," with the U.S. military reserving the right "to operate wherever international law permits." This was the first time two Ticonderoga-class cruisers had transited the strait together. This type of show of force was unprecedented yet firm, as cruisers are the most significant means of power projection after those of a carrier strike group.

On December 30, 2025, China conducted large-scale military exercises involving live-fire drills around Taiwan for the fourth time **(Figure 6)**. To do so, it mobilized significant assets from its Army, Navy, Air Force, and missile forces. Dubbed *"Justice Mission 2025"* and simulating a close-range blockade of Taiwan, these exercises appeared this time to be a response to the United States' sale of a $11 billion arms package to Taiwan—the largest arms sale ever made. These latest exercises are part of a trend toward an increase in the frequency and complexity of operations conducted by China in the Taiwan Strait region in recent years **(1)**.

**Figure 6 • Zones d'opérations chinoises de la quatrième crise de Taïwan**




Source. Reuters

**(1)** The December 2025 exercises highlighted a general trend toward the normalization of military maneuvers in the Taiwan Strait over the past few years. Intended to signal China's stance toward Taiwan, these exercises increased following the visit to Taiwan by Nancy Pelosi, then Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, and her meeting with former Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen in August 2022. That visit triggered a large-scale series of Chinese military exercises intended to condemn it. Over the next three years, several major exercises took place, including one in April 2023 and two *"Joint-Sword"* exercises in 2024. Fortunately, none of these exercises were as intense as the one conducted during the third Taiwan Strait crisis of 1995–1996, widely regarded as one of the most serious incidents that nearly escalated into a confrontation in the strait.

The main means of intimidation employed by the PLA have consisted of reserving exercise zones around the island, simulated blockades, and air operations whose scope, scale, and complexity continue to grow. They increasingly resemble rehearsals in preparation for a potential invasion, as the routine nature of these operations without prior warning makes it difficult to distinguish between a simple exercise and the mechanization of a real blockade prior to an invasion. Furthermore, the repetition of these unannounced operations fosters, over time, a desensitization to the threat, inevitably leading to a decline in vigilance among the ROC's forces.

These operations allow forces to approach within less than 12 nautical miles of the coast, which would enable PLAN forces to launch a widespread attack around the island without having to cross the Taiwan Strait under fire from defenders. The defenders would thus be deprived of the reaction time advantage provided by the time required for PLAN vessels coming from the mainland to cross the strait.

Preparations for an attack on Taiwan have accelerated with the deployment of the Chinese maritime militia and the resumption of the tactics used to regain control of Hainan and the Wansan Islands. It has proven particularly effective later in taking control of shoals slated for land reclamation in the South China Sea by anchoring hundreds of these vessels in such a way that the Philippine Coast Guard, overwhelmed by their numbers and prevented from firing due to the intruders' "civilian" status, is unable to drive them away. The Chinese coast guard then completed the takeover of the sites and secured them until the land reclamation work was completed and the artificial islands were built. The maritime militia's maneuver was replicated on a much larger scale on two occasions, likely in coordination with Operation *"Justice Mission 2025*."

From December 23 to 25, 2025, a group of 1,700 Chinese fishing boats—or more likely a large contingent of them integrated with maritime militia and coast guard vessels—was deployed in a tight, coordinated formation in the East China Sea near Ningbo. The gathering was fully established by Christmas Day. The formation was repeated from January 9 to 12, 2026, and the vessels maintained their relative positions for over 30 hours. The use of hundreds of fishing boats to conduct amphibious operations is reminiscent of the modus operandi carried out in Jinmen in 1949 and in Hainan the following year. Their support by the maritime militia—which has been significantly expanded since 2016 and is well-versed in coordinated operations—enables a tenfold increase in maritime transport capacity. The intended overwhelming of defenders by the sheer number of attackers is fully in line with the maritime tradition of the early days of the PLAN. Moving from groups of a few hundred maritime militia boats—as was done in the South China Sea to peacefully take control of shoals by overwhelming the response capabilities of two or three Philippine Coast Guard vessels —to 1,700 boats in the East China Sea demonstrates remarkable progress since 1949 in Chinese amphibious doctrine and its light forces projection capabilities.

A sudden, coordinated operation of this kind by the maritime militia could be used this time to launch a massive attack on Taiwan with a first wave of assaults simultaneously along all coastlines, where these vessels could run aground and disembark the few soldiers on board each of them. The defenses of the Republic of China's armed forces could be overwhelmed by the sheer number of targets and run out of anti-ship missiles and other types of high-precision munitions even before the arrival of the second wave, which would consist of PLAN force projection vessels pre-positioned in a manner similar to that of the Fourth Crisis.

Lessons learned from the war in Ukraine show that the massive use of small aerial and naval suicide drones sent in swarms (i.e., with coordinated movements) would make it possible to strike and destroy the ships carrying out this type of attack. Does Taiwan have enough of them? Furthermore, will the U.S. missiles needed to counter the second wave—for the purchase of which an additional budget of $40 billion was announced on November 26, 2025—still be available after the excessive use of such weapons during operations conducted by US forces in 2026 in Yemen and Iran? If not, a direct attack on Taiwan of this kind could be imminent; it would primarily target the Taiwan Strait without any guaranteed involvement from the United States, which would be bogged down in a distant war in the gulf of Hormuz that consumes too many high-tech weapons.

## Defending the Straits in a High-Intensity War

Apart from the previous scenario, and in the event of a high-intensity war involving the United States and its allies, undersea warfare would likely be the prelude to the conflict. The threat to U.S. and allied carrier strike groups is anymore too great for them to venture into the waters of the adjacent seas. The proximity of Chinese naval and air bases, as well as the range of the high-speed, long-range missiles they have developed—such as the DF-21D "aircraft carrier killer" or the DF-26B "Guam killer"— would put them in immediate danger and force them to remain at a safe distance, far on the other side of the strait **(1)** while still within striking range with their aircraft. This is what the United States did during the fourth crisis, when, unlike in the three previous ones, it avoided risking one of its aircraft carriers in the Taiwan Strait.

This would no longer be a show of force, but a full-scale war—something fast attack submarines (SSNs) and hunter-killer submarines excel at: discreetly gathering intelligence and striking to kill. In particular, they are the worst enemies of other submarines. Just as during World War II with Japan, *the U.S. Navy* and its allies would send submarines wherever the PLAN has its own and wherever it concentrates its power-projection capabilities and forces.

The island of Hainan is located in the South China Sea, where, in tunnels dug into the mountains, lies the operational base of China's strategic oceanic force as well as that of the SSNs of the Southern Fleet. Two aircraft carriers and an amphibious assault ship are also based there. Furthermore, this sea is of paramount importance to the Chinese economy, both for the fishery resources it contains and for the enormous maritime traffic flowing between the Strait of Malacca and the Taiwan Strait. It is also home to China's bastion—a priority patrol zone for SSBNs—and the powerful Chinese naval aviation complex that contributes to its protection. It is also where China faces off against each of the neighboring states due to maritime disputes surrounding the "nine-dash line" that pits it against them.

For all these reasons, and others such as the energy reserves beneath its seabed, this sea is of primary interest to the SSNs of all nations that possess them **(2)**. It is also of interest to those of Russia, China's main maritime partner, though this cannot be definitively stated given the high sensitivity of the domain of undersea warfare. All countries with submarines have a pressing need to understand their actual capabilities and vulnerabilities compared to those of potential adversaries' submarine forces. To this end, they systematically gather technical, tactical, and movement intelligence. They may be gathered during international exercises, targeted operations, unexpected encounters, etc. The most valuable intelligence is obtained when the adversary is unaware of being tracked or intercepted, for example, as it approaches a chokepoint such as a strait or upon leaving its base when, believing itself to be in a safe zone, it might let its guard down and thus reveal elements of its acoustic signature, for instance.

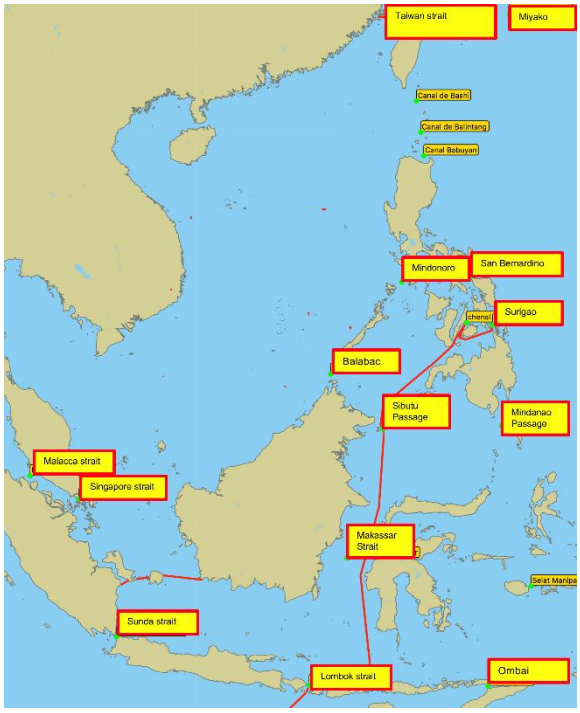
It was likely during one of these highly classified missions in the South China Sea that, around October 2, 2021, the *Seawolf-class* nuclear-powered submarine USS *Connecticut* **(3)** collided with an uncharted underwater mountain "while operating in international waters." Eleven crew members were injured by the force of the impact. Neither the exact date nor the location of the incident was disclosed. The Connecticut was forced to surface due to the damage sustained. It returned to Guam for emergency repairs before embarking on a long surface transit to Bremerton, Washington, where it underwent two and a half years of repairs. Stealthy submerged navigation is a difficult art that relies on a thorough knowledge of bathymetry and highly precise, redundant navigation systems. Incorrect documentation or a malfunction can lead to this type of accident. Every country has experienced this, including China when, on August 21, 2023, SSN 093-417 sank in the Yellow Sea. China sought to cover it up, apparently to save face.

The United States, which possesses excellent nuclear-powered attack submarines—a concept it developed early in the Cold War—has allocated the largest research and development budget in the Navy to its submarine forces. This has enabled the U.S. to explore novel areas of operational use for these particularly durable and stealthy vessels. The case of the USS *Triton* is particularly interesting, as it completed the first submerged circumnavigation in 1960, following the very route taken by Magellan and El Cano **(Figure 7)**. This large 7,750-ton submarine traveled 41,519 nautical miles in 84 days at an average speed over 18 knots. It completed the voyage without any particular concerns regarding acoustic stealth, as the USSR had not yet commissioned a

**(1)** This is why *the U.S. Air Force* developed the "*Agile Combat Employment*" (ACE) strategy, which shifts from the concept of centralized infrastructure to a network of smaller, dispersed sites in order to complicate the adversary's planning and provide more options to joint force commanders. Nevertheless, these sites are fixed and therefore easy to target from a distance, which is not the case for aircraft carriers, which are protected by their tactical mobility.
**(2)** The United States, the United Kingdom, France, India, Russia, China, and, in the long term, Australia—if the highly uncertain AUKUS program is carried through to completion.
**(3)** Despite their age, the Seawolfs are among the most technologically advanced submarines ever built. They are said to be much quieter than the Los Angeles and Virginia-class submarines, which make up the bulk of the *U.S. Navy's* SSN fleet. With a maximum submerged speed of 35 knots and an impressive arsenal of torpedoes and missiles, they are also the fastest and best-armed. Since their construction cost significantly more than that of other submarine classes, the Seawolf program was ultimately scaled back to just three units due to budget cuts following the end of the Cold War. They are reserved for special operations.

comparable submarine. In addition to the extraordinary feat this represents, it should be noted that, in accordance with the journal of Antonio Pigafetta (1), Magellan's chronicler, he traversed the Philippine and Indonesian archipelagos while submerged, from the Surigao Strait to the Lombok Strait, passing through the Sibutu Passage and the Makassar Strait, thereby opening a route for submarine navigation by a large-tonnage vessel in these heavily congested waters at a time when satellite navigation systems did not exist. This is just one example of a submarine's capabilities, although none of these straits allows direct passage from the Pacific to the South China Sea.

**Figure 7 • Route de l'USS Triton du Pacifique à l'océan Indien (1960)**




This calls for a remark regarding the importance of oceanography for submarine navigation. In the previous case, the *Triton* benefited from information gathered during the Pacific War, when U.S. submarine activity in the seas bordering the Pacific was particularly intense. *The U.S. Navy* had compiled detailed navigation charts at that time. Starting a few months after the United States entered the war against Japan, a permanent presence of U.S. submarines was maintained off the coast of Tokyo as well as in the seas near China.

Mapping the ocean floor is at the heart of the current tensions. From an operational standpoint, it has direct value for navies: underwater navigation, acoustic propagation, seabed absorption, sensor deployment, route planning, knowledge of canyons and topography, etc. For years, China has been conducting campaigns in several oceans, coastal seas, and archipelagic waters with its numerous oceanographic vessels. These vessels use, in particular, drones and underwater gliders that can operate discreetly for months on end, even extending into the territorial waters—and sometimes the internal waters—of coastal states. They do so in defiance of the law of the sea and despite their protests when one of these devices is found stranded on a coast or in fishermen's nets. In modern oceanography, the same sonars, the same data processing methods, and sometimes the same ships are used for scientific purposes and dual-use applications.

(1) Adolphe Lepotier, *The First Circumnavigation of the World Under the Sea*, France-Empire, 1963.

On September 15, 2021, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia established a trilateral security partnership aimed at countering China (1). This initiative, dubbed *"AUKUS,"* was jointly announced by U.S. President Joe Biden and Prime Ministers Boris Johnson and Scott Morrison, who met virtually via videoconference. They presented it as the next crucial step in a long-standing alliance. This project is expected to make Australia the seventh country in the world to possess nuclear-powered submarines. It primarily involves granting access to the *Stirling* naval base in Australia and building SSNs for Australia. While the latter project could be postponed indefinitely due to the United States' difficulties in meeting its own SSN requirements and the poor condition of British dockyards, the HMAS *Stirling* base in Perth, located on Australia's west coast, is already being used by U.S. and U.K. SSNs for maintenance between patrols with the support of a submarine replenishment ship, without the need to return to their home port. This base had previously been off-limits to them due to Australia's anti-nuclear policy. It offers the enormous immediate strategic advantage of being located approximately 2,000 nautical miles from the deep-water straits in the southern South China Sea—the Sunda and Lombok Straits—which is roughly the same distance as that between the U.S. base in Guam and the Bachi Strait. These are two diametrically opposed access points to this strategic sea. As for Australia's current submarine fleet—six conventional-powered Collins-class submarines over thirty years old—they are obsolete. Their replacement is urgently needed.

As for the countries in the first island chain, their force structures vary greatly. The Philippines plans to establish a conventional submarine force, but it has no experience in undersea warfare and a meager defense budget. This is not the case for Japan or South Korea, which possess excellent domestically designed vessels. Long hindered by Article 9 of its constitution, which states that "the Japanese people forever renounce war," Japan finally opened its first overseas base in Djibouti in 2011. On March 29, 2016, controversial national security laws came into effect, shifting Japan's concept of self-defense to that of collective defense of its allies. Tensions with China escalated further with the arrival of Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi on October 21, 2025, and her rapprochement with Taiwan. With President Trump taking office in late 2025 and the U.S. alliances being called into question, Japan, Australia, and South Korea took political steps toward the development of nuclear-powered submarines. Japan and South Korea, which had focused the design of their naval forces on high-end diesel submarines equipped with Li-ion batteries, are now reevaluating their approach in this new geostrategic context. Implementing such development programs will take time, but this decision seems inevitable, likely with the agreement of the United States, which wants both countries to play a greater role in its defense than they currently do.

Taiwan, after long and unsuccessful attempts to purchase submarines abroad, has finally decided to build them itself. On September 28, 2023, it unveiled *the Hai Kun (Narwhal)*, following a major technological feat achieved with the help of several Western companies (2). It plans to build eight of these diesel-electric submarines equipped with Li-ion batteries, which would provide them with excellent tactical mobility, necessary to block the straits near the island; in particular the Bashi Strait, close to its base.

In the event of a short-term conflict, the joint use of these conventional submarines under a single operational command would allow them to be deployed as a blockade in front of the main straits that PLAN forces—particularly its submarines—might use to attempt to cross the first chain of islands. As during the Cold War, the Japanese would position certain vessels in a blocking in the Sea of Japan in front of the straits used by Russia, particularly the Tsugaru, La Pérouse, and Kuril straits in the Pacific. They are already monitoring the joint movements and activities carried out by the Behemoth's navies in the Sea of Japan and the Pacific.

The case of North Korea is unique. A genuine nuclear threat and a military ally of Russia, it is developing a massive arms program and seeks to acquire SSBNs. It already possesses missiles capable of being launched while submerged and a large number of midget submarines, primarily intended for infiltration operations in South Korea, since North Korean agents cannot cross the demarcation line by land. Some are equipped with torpedoes, and it was likely one of these that sank the South Korean corvette *Cheonan* in 2010. The military value of the North Korean navy is mediocre and stems primarily from its potential to cause disruption, its status as a nuclear power, and the absolute power of the Kim dynasty, which rules it without any countervailing authority. The small submarines, although very rudimentary, would be well suited for warfare in archipelagic waters.

(1) This came at the expense of France and the French company Naval Group, which had signed the "contract of the century" with Australia on February 11, 2019, for the delivery of twelve conventionally powered Shortfin Barracuda submarines.
(2) Hugues Eudeline, "Les nouveaux sous-marins de Taiwan pourraient-ils changer l'équilibre des forces face à la Chine ?", *Conflits*, October 14, 2023, available here.

## Tighten the cangue around the other straits

To wage the war of the straits along the entire length of the cague, Pacific nations bound to the United States by defense treaties rely heavily on American weapons, both for reasons of wartime logistics and operational doctrine. With regard to amphibious operations, they adopt an organization similar to that of the United States, which has the *U.S. Marines*. In most countries, similar forces fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Navy, with the notable exception of Japan, which recently established its own marine corps within the Ground Self-Defense Force. On March 27, 2018, it underwent its most significant structural reform since its creation in 1954, with the establishment of a unified command and the launch of a Rapid Deployment Amphibious Brigade (ARDB) tasked with defending Japan's outlying islands. Initially comprising 1,500 personnel, it will eventually number 3,000.

The *U.S. Marine* Corps is also evolving and reorganizing three of its regiments to adapt to straits warfare throughout the Pacific. To this end, it is transforming them into *"Marine Littoral Regiments"* (MLRs). These new-type regiments will be based in Okinawa and Hawaii for the first two in 2025, and on the island of Guam in 2027 for the third. Each MLR comprises approximately 2,000 Marines and a few sailors to operate certain equipment. Some units will be deployed to a series of temporary, rudimentary land-based sites within a contested or potentially contested maritime zone to conduct access denial and maritime control operations, as well as fleet support operations. These forces are designed to provide long-range detection and firepower using mobile missile batteries capable of striking enemy vessels on strategic maritime routes. They are equipped with aerial reconnaissance drones and anti-ship missile systems capable of hitting targets up to 100 nautical miles away. They would also be equipped with transport barges as well as combat and logistics drones—both surface and aerial—to operate with the autonomy required by the dispersion across the islands that form the straits. The 3rd MLR in Hawaii is operational. The 12th MLR in Okinawa is tasked with protecting the islands of Japan's first island chain, extending to the Philippines and including South Korea, from China. In the event of a crisis in Taiwan, the islands southwest of Okinawa, where U.S. military bases are located, could also be drawn into the fighting. The 4th MLR in Guam will be tasked with rapidly deploying within the first island chain, to the Philippines, in order to expand the theater of operations and protect the strategic lines of communication linking Japan to the Philippines and then to Hawaii.

To increase their presence in the Philippine archipelago, the *Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA),* originally signed in 2014, was reactivated in June 2023 by the United States and the Philippines. Under this agreement, the Philippines grants the United States access to nine of its military bases, including four added in 2023; among them is the Camillo Osias Naval Base, which overlooks the Luzon Strait.

While it is possible to block a strait by stationing a submarine at its exit, it is possible to completely prevent passage by laying mines suited to its bathymetry. Tethered mines that float between the surface and the seabed remain effective for decades, as their detonation mechanism does not rely on a battery-powered system. They explode when a hull breaks one of their antennae. Other mines laid on the seabed may contain very large explosive charges. They generally have different types of firing systems, such as those triggered by changes in the magnetic field caused by a passing ship, or by the noise generated by its propulsion. It may be a combination of these systems. Some have counters that only trigger the firing mechanism after a certain number of passes. Others, such as the American *Captor-type* mines from the Cold War, are deployed in deep waters to target submarines. They contain a torpedo that is released by the system when a target is detected passing by. Some may be booby-trapped to prevent mine countermeasures.

Control of the Bashi Strait by the PLAN in wartime against a major nuclear power like the United States would be essential to prevent its SSBNs from dispersing across the Pacific Ocean. This strategic need to ensure the availability of its primary deterrent would in itself justify the necessity of taking Taiwan and, conversely, the need for the Republic of China Navy to be able to close this passage.

We have found that the island of Taiwan is the geographical center of gravity of the first island chain, which stretches from the Malay Peninsula to Kyūshū, the southernmost of Japan's four main islands. Furthermore, when expanding the geographical scope to southern Russia, it becomes also apparent that the Taiwan Strait is equidistant from the Singapore Strait—which marks the outlet of the Strait of Malacca into the South China Sea—and the La Pérouse Strait, which provides access to the Sea of Okhotsk, a distance of 1,700 nautical miles.

It is therefore also the center of gravity for all ice-free straits providing access to the Pacific Ocean.

With the melting of ice due to global warming and geopolitical uncertainties in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, maritime traffic is expected to gradually shift. As navigation in the Indian Ocean becomes more dangerous due to the—likely long-term—destabilization of the countries in the Shia Crescent, commercial traffic from Asia to Europe is expected to be rerouted. It would follow the new 21st-century Arctic Silk Road announced in 2018 by President Xi Jinping, starting from the Taiwan Strait—which will retain its importance due to its central position along the Chinese coast—toward the Bering Strait and the Arctic routes. Unless

the new importance of these routes—coveted equally by the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation—leads to a competition between a maritime China, a new Leviathan far from its bases, and a coastal but still land-based Russia that remains a Behemoth. This new struggle would be fueled by China's long-term historical memory, which does not forget that Russia was one of the nations responsible for the "century of humiliation." It is certain that China will demand reparations.

# The Near-Continuous coastline of the Three Nuclear Autocracies

The world's largest country, the Russian Federation is today an enormous landmass of approximately 17,100,000 km$^2$. It stretches continuously across 170° of longitude, from the border with Estonia in Europe to the Bering Strait, which separates Asia from the U.S. state of Alaska. It thus stretches across nearly half of the Earth's surface, at latitudes all above 40° North.

To understand the geostrategic importance of access to the Pacific for Russia, one must take a long-term view and go back to the time when its navy was first established. Geography is stubborn; the need to open up the country by establishing a sea route connecting its two extremities—from Murmansk to Vladivostok—through waters that remain navigable year-round remains the same more than three centuries later. These needs are existential, and despite repeated failures, Russia, regardless of which government is in power, has always persisted in its efforts to achieve this goal. Having failed to achieve this by force, the Russian Federation is now seeking to consolidate its historical gains through closer ties with North Korea and the PRC. These three nuclear autocracies, which share a near-continuous coastline, share the same need to secure their access to the Pacific Ocean and, beyond that, to the global ocean.

Incidentally, it is worth noting that the two continental states—the United States of America and Russia—both border the same two oceans, the Pacific and the Atlantic. They also share the same strategic need to be able to quickly move their naval fleets from one ocean to the other as operational requirements dictate. In the case of the United States, this shipping route passes through the Caribbean Sea and the Panama Canal (excluding aircraft carriers too large to enter the locks); in the case of Russia, this route passes through the Bering Strait and the Northeast Passage. This lends particular importance to these two chokepoints.

## Historical Geography of Russia's Expansion Toward the Pacific

Under the leadership of Peter the Great (1672–1725), who understood and had studied the importance of naval power, the Russian Empire sought to control the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea. Convinced of the importance of the sea, the tsar remarked that "as a political adage says about states that do not possess a naval fleet, they are like someone with only one arm, while those that possess a fleet have two."… Recognizing the importance of a regular naval force, Peter I had the Boyar Duma adopt a ukase on seagoing vessels on October 20, 1696. This day is still considered the birth date of the Russian Empire's fleet.

Russia's expansion across all of Siberia endowed the Empire, in addition to the semi-enclosed seas mentioned earlier, with two oceanic coastlines: the Atlantic (via the White Sea) and the Pacific (via the sea of Bering). They are connected by the Bering Strait and the Northeast Passage, which crosses the Arctic Ocean. Long permanently blocked by ice, it is gradually opening up to maritime traffic without the aid of icebreakers due to global warming. This route between Asia and Europe, which is shorter than the alternative that circles Eurasia from the south, is expected to supplant it unless geopolitical uncertainties in the region outweigh the economic benefits.

**Russia's Expansion Toward the Pacific** • Lacking natural borders to protect it from invasions of any kind, Russia has always sought to expand in order to create buffer zones, using vast expanses of land to compensate for the lack of natural borders. In the seventeenth century, it conquered vast territories to the east, which were relatively easy to access. This is what makes it the largest country in the world today. Between 1610 and 1640, the Russians advanced 4,800 kilometers to the Pacific. The ocean was reached in 1639 by the Cossack Ivan Moskvitianine, who took possession of Siberia in the name of the tsar. In 1648, another Cossack, Semion Dejnev, set out from the mouth of the Kolyna River on the Arctic Ocean. Unwittingly, he discovered—and crossed from

north to south—the strait that is now known as the Bering Strait (1) and which allowed him to reach the Pacific Ocean (2). Having set out with five boats, he managed to reach the mouth of the Anadyr River with only three, where the city of the same name would be founded. Located at the eastern tip of Siberia, on the Bering Sea—which is separated from the Pacific Ocean by the straits of the Aleutian Islands—it is today the easternmost city in Russia. Starting in 1647, Cossacks wintered in Okhotsk, which became the first settlement established by the Russians on the shores of the Sea of Okhotsk, another access point to the Pacific Ocean via the straits between the Sakhalin Islands.

Peter the Great ordered the first Kamchatka expedition in 1724 to search for a Northeast Passage that would allow the imperial fleet (and its merchant marine) to travel directly between the two ends of the Empire. The strategic need for this maritime shortcut was highlighted by the odyssey of the Baltic Fleet, which was forced to sail around Africa to come to the aid of the Russian Pacific Fleet under attack by Japan—a mission that culminated in the disaster of the Battle of Tsushima in 1905 (3). This route through the Arctic Ocean, which is gradually opening up due to climate change, was completely blocked until the commissioning of the first icebreakers. The steadily advancing ice melt could allow all types of ships to navigate this Northeast Passage without assistance within the next thirty years.

The first Russian maritime expedition was led by Vitus Bering from 1725 to 1731. Setting out from Kamchatka, the mission was to explore the Asian coast of the Pacific. The expedition confirmed the existence of the strait previously discovered by Semyon Dejneff between Asia and America. The expedition, as was later established, crossed the Bering Strait to reach the Chukchi Sea, then returned, believing it had accomplished its mission. Although it did not reach the North American coast, it provided proof that Asia and North America are not connected. The results of the first Kamchatka expedition did not satisfy the Russian government either, so another was prepared as early as 1732. Its objectives were even more ambitious: to study the northeastern coastline of the Asian continent, reach the coast of North America and Japan, describe the coastline of the Sea of Okhotsk to the mouth of the Amur River, search for a sea route around Asia, and study the Kuril Islands and Sakhalin Island (4).

Still under the command of Vitus Bering, the expedition—which lasted a total of ten years—set sail from Saint Petersburg in 1733. It reached Okhotsk—which had become a bustling port with a shipyard—four years later. Four ships were built there by workers from the St. Petersburg Admiralty who were part of the expedition. The explorers set sail on September 8, 1740, and arrived on October 6, 1740, in Avacha Bay, where the city of Petropavlovsk was founded, on the Pacific coast of Kamchatka. It would later be renamed Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky. Since 1938, a submarine base has been located in nearby Viliuchinsk.

This "Great Northern Expedition," or second Kamchatka expedition, made it possible to map most of the Arctic coast of Siberia and a large part of that of North America. Conceived by Tsar Peter the Great, it took place during the reigns of Empresses Anne and Elizabeth. Peter hoped that the 18th-century Russian navy would chart a Northern Sea Route connecting Europe to the Pacific. With more than 3,000 people involved directly or indirectly, it was one of the greatest explorations in history.

Vitus Bering was the first European to arrive in Alaska in 1741. He made it a Russian territory whose natural resources (particularly furs) were overexploited. The tsar, realizing he could not defend this territory—which lay far from the centers of Russian power in the Baltic—sold it to the United States in 1867. Russia simply did not have the naval and logistical capabilities to stand up to the United States, which was in the midst of territorial expansion, or to the British naval power present in neighboring Canada. Since then, the Bering Strait has separated Russian Siberia from American Alaska. United States. One hundred and eight nautical miles (200 kilometers) long and 45 nautical miles wide, its depth of approximately 50 meters allows passage for all types of vessels, including submarines, as demonstrated by the USS Nautilus, which crossed it in 1958 before proceeding to the North Pole and completing its crossing of the Arctic Ocean via the Denmark Strait.

The Russian submarine forces are divided between two main theaters: the North Atlantic and the Pacific. Nuclear-powered submarines, both SSBNs and SSNs, can move from one to the other while submerged, regardless of weather conditions or the thickness of the ice cover on the Arctic Ocean. This is not the case, however, for conventional diesel-electric submarines, even those equipped with an AIP (*Air-Independent Propulsion*) system, which must charge their batteries via the snorkel—and do so all the more frequently as they move at high speeds. The fragility of their sonar domes (5) forces them to avoid any surface navigation in cold seas, at the risk of colliding with ice floes, even when assisted by icebreakers. They therefore cannot navigate in the Arctic

(1) The Bering Strait is named after the Danish navigator Vitus Bering (1681–1741), who crossed the strait in the summer of 1728 on behalf of the Russian navy, 80 years after Dejneff, whose discovery had gone unnoticed.
(2) Nicholas V. Riasanovsky and Andrei Akovlevich, *History of Russia from Its Origins to 1984*, Robert Laffont, 1987, p. 215.
(3) The distance from Saint Petersburg to the Tsushima Strait would have been 8,000 nautical miles if the Northeast Passage had existed. It was 20,000 nautical miles by circumnavigating Africa. The journey took 7 months and 13 days.
(4) Valentin Michanov, Lioudmila Spiridonova, and Vladimir B. Maksimov, *The Fleet of the Russian Empire*, Slavia, 1996, p. 106.
(5) The surface of the sonar dome must be perfectly smooth to prevent the internal noise generated by turbulent water flow as the submarine moves forward.

unless transported by a semi-submersible surface vessel or in areas completely free of ice. Surface vessels accompanied by an icebreaker can also move from one theater to another when weather conditions are favorable.

**Difficult early encounters with the Middle Kingdom** • Further south, other expeditions explored the Amur River basin—a river that flows into the Sea of Okhotsk—where the Russians first came into contact with the Chinese of the Qing Dynasty. The European power and the Eastern empire separated for a very long time by a vast expanse of steppe, inevitably came into conflict. In 1651, the Russians built the Albazin fortress on the left bank of the river. In 1685, the Chinese army destroyed Albazin. The following year, after the Russians had reoccupied the fortress, Chinese troops besieged it once again. Just as Albazin was about to fall, two Russian emissaries hurried to Beijing to request negotiations, which the Chinese also desired. The meeting of the Chinese and Russian delegations in Nerchinsk marked the first encounter on equal terms between China and the West and, more broadly, the first confrontation between the two traditions on the international stage. To bridge the gap between the two delegations, separated by a vast cultural divide, the missionaries—Thomas Pereira, a Portuguese Jesuit, and Jean-François Gerbillon, a French Jesuit—accompanied the Chinese delegation as Latin interpreters, while the Russian delegation had Andrei Belobotsky as its Latin translator (1). The treaty, signed on September 6, 1689, stipulated that the border was set along the Argun and Gorbitsa rivers as well as the Stanovoy mountain range (2). The Russians temporarily relinquished access to the Sea of Japan and thus to the straits leading to the Pacific. However, one of the treaty's clauses allowed Russian merchants with a passport to trade freely throughout the entire Chinese Empire (3).

**The Crimean War of 1853–1856** • From 1853 to 1856, it pitted the Russian Empire against an alliance comprising the Ottoman Empire, the Second French Empire, the United Kingdom, and the Kingdom of Sardinia-Piedmont. Although the main naval front was in the Black Sea, smaller-scale operations were conducted in the Baltic and the Pacific. This third naval front, where the vast Russian territory could be threatened by the Franco-British fleets, was at the ends of the earth. It opened up on the distant and desolate shores of the icy seas, in Kamchatka and on the far western edge of the North American continent, in what was then Russian Alaska. The operation against Petropavlovsk, a port on the Pacific, was poorly conducted by a British admiral who eventually committed suicide, and then by his indecisive French successor. It was a tactical failure with no strategic consequences, as, due to the vast distances involved, no Russian reinforcements had been sent to support the city. After an initial unsuccessful attack, the Anglo-French squadron withdrew. When it reappeared off the coast of Kamchatka in the spring of 1855, the port of Petropavlovsk had been evacuated by the Pacific Fleet, which had taken refuge at the mouth of the Amur River, where the allied squadron was unable to locate the Russian ships.

**Unequal treaties and access to the Pacific Ocean** • From 1856 to 1860, the Second Opium War pitted China against France and the United Kingdom, which had formed an alliance for different reasons but with the same economic goal: to open the Middle Kingdom to international trade. Poorly armed and poorly organized, incapable of waging a modern war, China was defeated, and Western troops entered Beijing for the first time. Lord Elgin, the British commander, signed a peace treaty there on behalf of the United Kingdom on October 24, 1860 (4). The following day, Baron Gros did the same for France. The court in Beijing was thus forced to authorize the permanent presence of Western diplomats, whom it could no longer ignore. China's opening to Western merchants and missionaries was formalized. Nevertheless, only the latter were permitted to reside anywhere in the Empire and build religious monuments there. The former could move about as they pleased, but could settle only in the open ports.

The number of these ports was increased to sixteen, including Tientsin, the one closest to Beijing. Shanghai was also among them; located at the mouth of the Yangtze, the great river that ocean-going ships could travel up for 1,000 kilometers to Hankou (one of the three cities that today make up Wuhan). Shanghai thus became the gateway to the interior of China. The "open ports" were locations specified in the treaties signed between China and foreign powers as being open to foreign residence and trade. Because extraterritoriality was the rule there, foreigners were accountable for their actions to the authorities of their own countries. Customs tariffs were moderate. Finally, under the most favored-nation clause, each foreign power automatically benefited from any privilege obtained by one of them from the Chinese government. Under the Treaty of Nanking of 1842, Canton, Xiamen, Fuzhou, Ningbo, and Shanghai were the first ports to be opened.

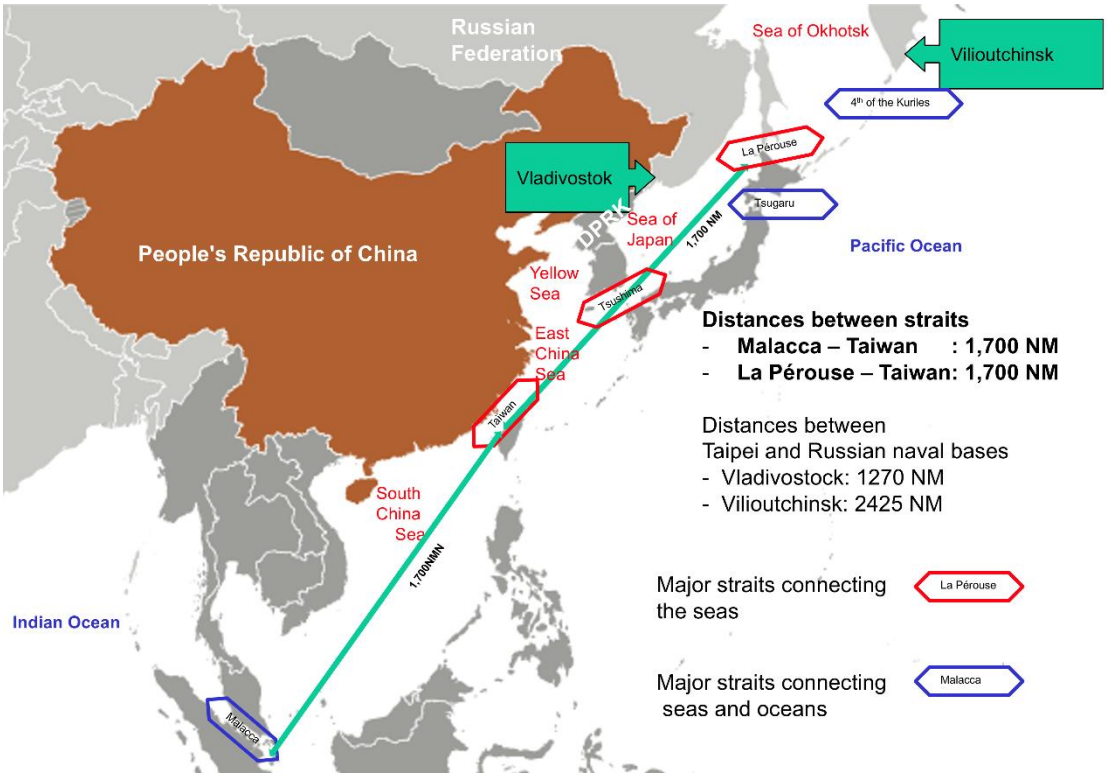
The Treaties of Tientsin (1858) and the Conventions of Beijing (1860) opened eleven additional ports: Newchwang, Hankou, Chinkiang, Kiukiang, Tamsui, Tainan, Swatow, Chefoo, Kiungchow, Nanjing, and Tientsin. China, which was also grappling with the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864), found itself in a desperate situation, which the Russian Empire exploited to impose two more

(1) Shenwen LI, "The Signing of the Treaty of Nerchinsk in 1689 between China and Russia: The Jesuits as a Cultural Interface," *in* Paul Servais (ed.), *Between Power and Cooperation. East-West Diplomatic Relations from the 17th to the 20th Century*, Bruyant-Academia, 2007.
(2) It is interesting to note that, although drafted in several languages, the Latin version was considered authoritative.
(3) René Pinon and Jean de Marcillac, *La Chine qui s'ouvre*, Perrin, 1900, p. 12.
(4) Eudeline, Hugues, *Géopolitique de la Chine. Une nouvelle thalassocratie*, PUF, 2024, p. 26.

"unequal treaties" on the country. In 1858, China ceded the left bank of the Amur River to Russia under the Treaty of Aigun, and in 1860, the Ussuri region under the Convention of Beijing, which also brought an end to the Second Opium War with France and Great Britain. As for Russia, this latter agreement confirmed and expanded the territorial gains acquired two years earlier with the cession to the Russian Empire of Outer Manchuria and the Ussuri Krai. To illustrate Russia's uniqueness, Jean de Marcillac aptly noted that "since Peter the Great, Russian statesmen [...] have pursued the domination of their race over the vast continent that, from the Baltic to the Sea of Japan, unfolds its infinite plains—without haste, without impatience, with the certainty that time is on their side, they are slowly accomplishing the task assigned to them by geography and history. The Russian eagle has two heads; one looks toward Europe and the other toward Asia." And he continues: "Siberia is not a colony of Russia; it is Russia" **(1)**.

The Russian population in Siberia had grown considerably, particularly along the Amur River, which had become a major transportation route. The city of Nikolayev-on-the-Amur was founded in 1853, Khabarovsk in 1858, and the port of Vladivostok in 1860 on the Sea of Japan. Its name, which means "Ruler of the East," is a symbol of that century of humiliation, the memory of which is carefully preserved in China. It constitutes a dispute that could prove potentially damaging in the long term between the two countries. The consequences of this traditional enmity could become all the more contentious given that the population of the People's Republic of China is now ten times larger than that of the Russian Federation. Furthermore, their respective military powers are no longer on the same scale, and the PRC needs arable land and space to develop. Vladivostok provided the Russian Empire with the much-sought-after access from the Sea of Japan through the Korean Straits to the Yellow Sea and the East China Sea, as well as to the Sea of Okhotsk via the La Pérouse Strait and, finally, to the Tsugaru Strait, the gateway to the Pacific Ocean **(2)** **(Figure 8)**.

**Figure 8 • The Russian Straits**




(1) Jean de Marcillac, "Who Will Exploit China?", *La Revue des Deux Mondes*, September 15, 1897. It is in line with this Slavic singularity that President Putin likes to point out, when asked to define the borders of the Russian Federation, that Russia is wherever there are Russians.
(2) The Tsugaru Strait is a strait located between Honshu and Hokkaido, in northern Japan, connecting the Sea of Japan to the Pacific Ocean. It consists of two arms, one to the east and the other to the west, each about 20 kilometers wide, with maximum depths of 200 meters and 140 meters, respectively, allowing submarines to pass through while submerged.

Under the enlightened leadership of Russian Finance Minister Sergei Witte, the country's railway network doubled in length between 1895 and 1905. The Russian imperial government, which sought to develop the Siberian economy, ensure logistics for the Pacific Fleet, and increase Russia's commercial, political, and military influence in China, had undertaken the construction of the gigantic Trans-Siberian Railway. Construction began on May 31, 1891, when Tsarevich Nicholas solemnly laid the first rail tie in Vladivostok for this railway, whose construction was well advanced by 1903. Only the section bypassing Lake Baikal would be completed later. This remarkable achievement made it possible to connect Moscow to the Pacific Ocean much more quickly than by sea. Indeed, since the Arctic Ocean was blocked by ice, the merchant fleet and the navy were forced to follow the long circumnavigation route, which was subject to the geopolitical uncertainties of relations with Great Britain, which controlled the Suez Canal.

On May 22, 1896, a secret Sino-Russian alliance treaty was signed, intended to counter Japanese ambitions in Manchuria and authorizing the construction of an extension of the Trans-Siberian Railway. On March 27, 1898, the ports (which remained ice-free) of Dalian and Port Arthur, located on the Yellow Sea, were ceded by China to Russia for 25 years. They are located 545 nautical miles (1,000 kilometers) west-southwest of Vladivostok, in the Sea of Japan, on the opposite side of the Korean Peninsula. A single strait, the Tsushima Strait, connects the seas in which they are situated. Port Arthur's location, at the mouth of the Bohai Sea, made it a strategic base that particularly controlled access to Tientsin, a port situated just 137 kilometers from Beijing. The Russian naval base established there was subsequently connected to the Trans-Siberian Railway via the Eastern Railway.

China's choice of this new ally, however, did not prove wise, as Russia was in turn crushed by Japan on land and at sea in 1904 and 1905. The naval battle of Tsushima on May 27, 1905, fought at the end of the 20,000-nautical-mile odyssey that took the Russian fleet from the Baltic to the Korea Strait, was particularly humiliating. The news reverberated around the world like a thunderclap. The myth of the Yellow Peril—which had already become a commonplace topic of discussion by the end of the nineteenth century—was reinforced. It would be highlighted in 1904 by H. J. Mackinder in his famous study *"The Geographical Pivot of History,"* and discussed at length that same year by "Captain Danrit" (the pen name of Colonel Driant) in his book *"The Yellow Invasion,"* in which he describes a victorious alliance between China and Japan against Europe. Ultimately, Russia would have had free and continuous access to the warm waters of the Pacific for only six years. All that remained to it was the naval base at Vladivostok, which was frozen over from December to April. Further north, under the Treaty of Saint Petersburg signed in 1875, Japan had ceded the entire island of Sakhalin to Russia, in exchange for which the Russians had relinquished the Kuril Islands to Japan.

By the end of 1924, China had recognized the USSR. The following year, Japan followed suit, resulting in the evacuation of the Russian part of Sakhalin Island, where it retained concessions for timber, coal, and oil **(1)**. The Soviet Union, which entered the war against Japan in 1945, recaptured these concessions through a series of masterful ground operations. It declared definitive possession of them in February 1946, thereby transforming the Sea of Okhotsk into a quasi-Soviet lake. Only the island of Hokkaido, the northernmost of the Japanese islands, remains for this to be the case. Japan claims the four southernmost islands, including two of the three largest (Iturup and Kunashir), as part of its territory, which is the source of the current maritime dispute. The disputed islands are known in Japan as the "Northern Territories."

The Russians opened an airbase on Iturup in 2017 and a small naval base in 2020. It is only 250 nautical miles from the La Pérouse Strait, which connects the Sea of Japan and the Sea of Okhotsk. The La Pérouse (Soya) Strait separates the Russian island of Sakhalin from the Japanese island of Hokkaido. It is 43 kilometers wide and 25 to 40 meters deep, allowing warships of all sizes to pass through, as well as submarines, yet on the surface.

**The Birth of the PRC and Its Difficult Relations with the USSR** • The Soviet Union did not intervene directly during the Chinese Civil War. However, it gave its unreserved support to the new communist regime, whose vast population provided an enormous source of strength in support of the ideology. Yet this very strength pitted the two states against each other in the competition for leadership of world communism. Through an agreement reached between them in 1950, the USSR ceded to the PRC the railways it owned in Manchuria while retaining for some time the naval base at Port Arthur (), from which the Japanese had been expelled in 1945. On February 14, 1950, in the context of the new friendship between the USSR and the PRC, the naval base could be used simultaneously by the Soviet fleet and the fleet of the People's Republic of China until its transfer to the latter, initially scheduled for late 1952, and then extended to 1955.

**(1)** The Russian Empire, then the USSR, and the Japanese Empire fought over its possession until the end of World War II, when the island became entirely Russian.

In his book *"White House Years*," Henry Kissinger refers to one of his articles published in 1969 in *"Foreign Affairs"* in which he argued that "the doctrine that Moscow has the right to intervene to protect the national socialist order made a Sino-Soviet war at least conceivable. For the accusations leveled by Moscow against Beijing were, so to speak, even more virulent than those directed against Prague" **(1)**.

The PRC shared a border with the USSR that stretched over 6,000 kilometers, part of which ran along the Ussuri River, a tributary of the Amur. The demarcation line was not precisely defined on one of the islands in the river, known as Damanski by the Soviets and Chenpao by the Chinese. Until then, this had not posed a problem, as the island was uninhabited. According to a Soviet press release, on the morning of March 2, 1969, 300 Chinese soldiers allegedly ambushed a patrol of Russian border guards there. Twenty-three of them were killed and fourteen wounded before they withdrew. The Soviets gave this clash immense and immediate publicity. It was an unprecedented event. On the morning of March 15, another border incident broke out, even more violent as the forces had prepared for it. The fighting lasted more than nine hours, involving tanks, armored vehicles, and artillery. Casualties were heavy on both sides, and both sides claimed victory. Further clashes took place in May of that same year along the Amur River, including one on the 28th at Fu-Yuan, near Khabarovsk. At the same time, clashes occurred along the borders of Xinjiang, in northwestern China. This led to a gradual rapprochement between China and the United States, a development that President Nixon had long favored. Yet another point of contention between the two countries.

China, whose thinking is rooted in the long term, likely has not forgotten that Russia was one of the nations responsible for the "century of humiliation" and that it took from China the part of Siberia south of the Amur River—the very region that provides China with the long-sought access to the (almost) warm waters of the Pacific. It is certain that China will demand reparations for this.

## Alliances and Partnerships Within the Behemoth

Russia has only one true ally: North Korea. It has supplied Russia with troops to fight in Ukraine and with artillery ammunition—of poor quality, it seems—at a time when Russia was sorely lacking it. In exchange, Russia is helping North Korea develop nuclear-powered submarines (*see above*). China, which is a partner of Russia rather than an ally, participates with it in frequent exercises and deployments of increasing complexity, stretching from the Baltic to the Bering Sea. Joint air and naval forces regularly conduct joint missions from the Aleutian Islands to the China Seas and around Japan, passing through the major straits. Having never experienced high-intensity naval combat, China benefits from the expertise Russia acquired during the Cold War.

In terms of maritime affairs, another ocean to which both countries attach equal importance—both for the raw materials and energy resources in its seabed and for the shipping routes opening up as a result of global warming—is the Arctic Ocean. Russia, which considers that half of the continental shelf rightfully belongs to it, is determined to control the Northeast Passage, which will finally open up the country and enable the development of its coastline from Murmansk to the Bering Strait, the gateway to the global ocean. Here again, it will face off against China, for which the opening of these routes is also an absolute economic necessity and therefore a matter of paramount geostrategic importance.

Will the three coastal nuclear powers—separated by such divergent cultures and interests—be able to combine their complementary strengths to draw closer to the point of uniting? Or will they vie for control of the straits, without which there can be no freedom of navigation?

**(1)** Henry Kissinger, *White House Years*, Little, Brown and Company, 1979. For the record, the Prague Spring ended in July 1968 with the intervention of Warsaw Pact troops.

# Conclusion

Taiwan is geographically at the focal point of the great circumnavigation route and equidistant from the Strait of Malacca—the gateway to the Indian Ocean—and the Tsugaru Strait leading to the Bering Strait—the gateway to the Arctic Ocean. The island, surrounded by straits whose access is essential to the PRC and which are potentially easy to block, poses a significant threat to the PRC's economy, which is primarily maritime. President Xi Jinping's determination to eliminate a threat in his immediate vicinity is all the stronger because it has persisted since the founding of the Republic of China and because the island is also a spectacular example of non-communist Chinese economic and political success. However, the likelihood of success for an attack on the island by the Republic of China's formidable navy and the uncertainties of an assault carried out by PLA units would not convince the most senior members of the military hierarchy, which could explain the series of dismissals of the top generals who commanded it by President Xi Jinping, a proponent of swift action. A failure could potentially have disastrous political consequences for President Xi Jinping.

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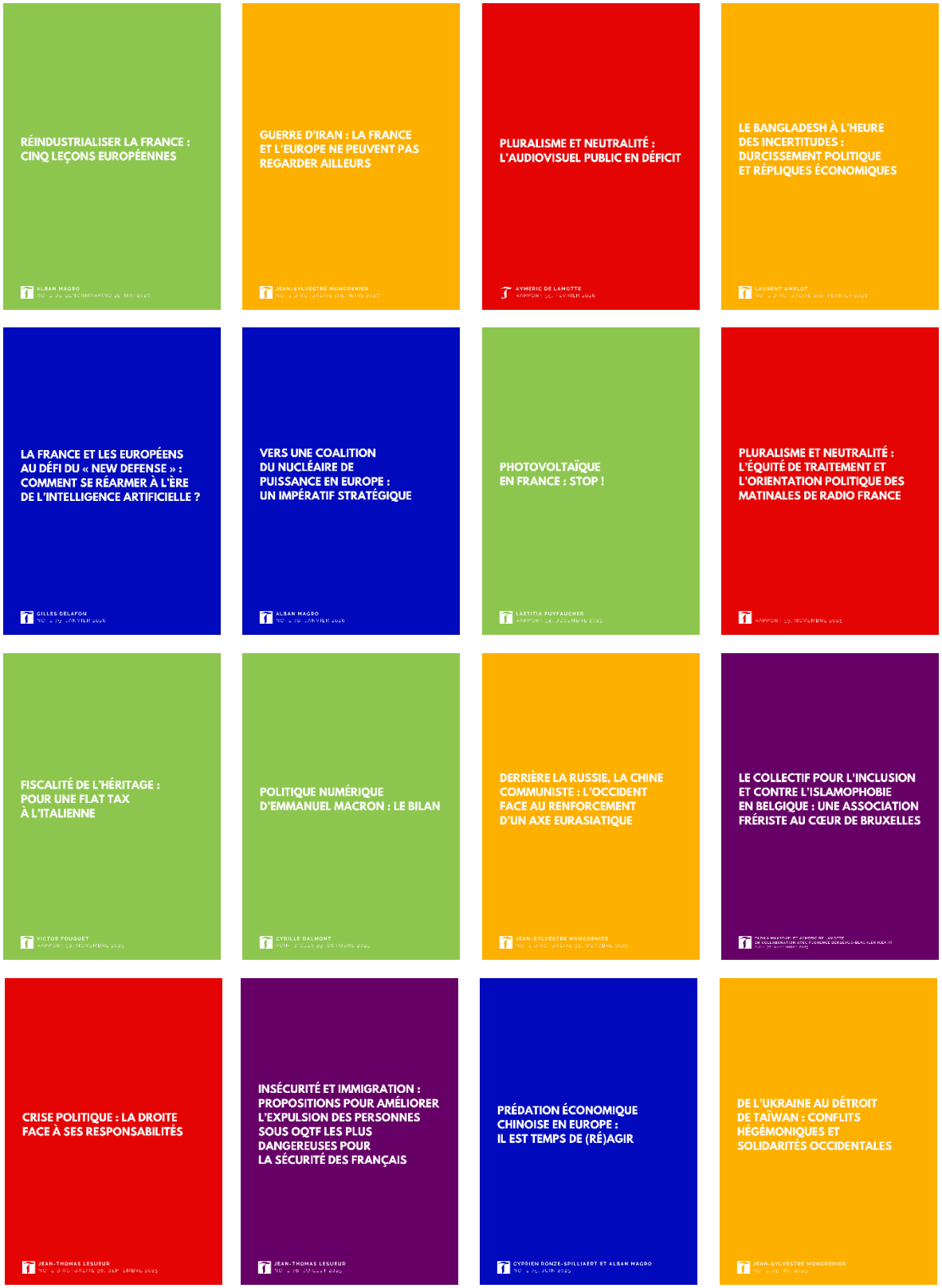

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