

MADRID SUMMIT 2022 · NATO FACES A CHANGE OF ERA



Nº 4 | 5 July 2022

The Indo-Pacific

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Indo-Pacific Theater, or Indian theater and peaceful theater?

The grouping in the same geopolitical section of two theaters as geographically distinct and separated as the Indian Ocean and the Pacific is a construct articulated by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe¹ that owes its origins to the Japanese vision of the world mediated by its extreme dependence on energy imports, which comes mainly from the Middle East traveling through the Indian Ocean, crossing the strategic Strait of Malacca, and then passing the two seas of China before landing in Japan. This construct has subsequently been incorporated by the United States into various articulations of its national strategy, as well as accepted by Europe as part of a narrative that seeks to strengthen ties with Japan, a nation certainly notable among the (few) of both theaters that share with Europe a political system based on democracy, respect for minorities, individual freedom and the rule of law, as well as contributing (only apparently) to simplifying the analysis of two areas not only complex but also alien to the daily attention of the European.

¹ Yuki Tatsumi, *European Engagement in the Maritime Security in Indo-Pacific. A Japanese Perspective*. Stimson Center Feb 2022

Among the European nations and with reference to the Indian Ocean and the Pacific, it is worth noting the particular case of France, which retains among its Territoires d'Outre-Mer numerous colonies in both oceans, including Wallis et Futuna, Nouvelle Calédonie, Mayotte, La Réunion, and the Kerguelen Islands and other southern territories, as well as the United Kingdom but to a much lesser extent. This, however, does not seem to add much to the joint consideration of both theaters, which, as the Japanese vision points out, owe their continuity to the immense commercial transit through Malacca, where 85% of the oil that leaves Hormuz circulates (16M barrels per day, out of a total of 19M), in addition to 28% of the world's soybeans, 20% of rice, 8% of wheat, 15% of corn, and 32% of ammonium sulfate, the main fertilizer.²

However, in spite of the Japanese vision and the commercial factors that support the overall vision, from the point of view of allied strategies to deal with possible conflicts in the area it is preferable to do so separately, largely because the dominant power in the Western Pacific, the People's Republic of China, also has an instrumental vision of the Indian Ocean not very different from the Japanese one, materialized in its case by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)³, in which the maritime component (curiously the road) of that great double project to intensify China's trade with Europe is obviously the great maritime artery that passes through Malacca, it has an energy branch that goes to the Strait of Hormuz, another of manufactured products and another one of raw materials that continues to Bab-el-Mandeb, and from there to the Mediterranean via Suez. The Pacific is, therefore, for China, the authentic theater where power relations are settled, while the Indian Ocean is merely accessory.

The different motivations, in the cases of Japan and China, for trying to influence the Indo-Pacific commercial arteries still need to be considered. The case of Japan is, perhaps, the most obvious because, as was the case with Germany during the first half of the twentieth century: "... a powerful and fit state as Germany, with its 60M inhabitants, must expand, cannot remain motionless; it must possess the territories that allow its population to emigrate without having to renounce their nationality." This observation of the British statesman Eyre Crowe at a memorial to King Edward VII in 1908⁴, may well have been an extendable warning to Japan, which in the early twentieth century responded to the same biological need of the state for

² Dymock A. et al, *Europe and the Sea, A continuing Story*, Mittler 2021, p. 73

³ Actually two independent initiatives, both referenced to the ancient "silk road" and called respectively *One Belt, One Road* (jointly OBOR), name by which they are still known in China. They were presented by Xi Jinping, the terrestrial One Belt in September 2013 in Kazakhstan, and the maritime One Road in October 2013 in Indonesia.

⁴ Sir Eyre Crowe drafted the *Foreign Perception of Germany 1918-1925*, known as the *Crowe Memorandum*, where he warns of the prospect of a conflict in Europe as a result of Germany's expansionist drift.

expanding its region of influence, leading it to several collisions with surrounding nations and colonial powers, culminating in the catastrophic war with the US in 1941.

China, however, has not sought territorial expansion along the German or Japanese lines, achieving its economic development and expansion, and in recent years to some extent territorial with the construction of artificial islands, with no need so far to use force.

The Alliance's Position

The North Atlantic Treaty organization was established for the constituent nations to mutualize defense against a threat, the Soviet one⁵, which had a strongly ideological basis. This ideological component of the original confrontation has an importance that has not always been duly appreciated (partly because the heir of the USSR, the Russian Federation, without the ideological burden has ended up exerting a threat not unlike that of its predecessor). The communism of Soviet Russia had a messianic character, a universal vocation that impelled them to "liberate" other people from the bonds of the unjust capitalist system, which according to communism enslaved the working masses for the benefit of a few plutocrats. This self-imposed mission became evident on the numerous occasions when the USSR corrected fractious partners (East Germany 1953, Hungary 1956, Czechoslovakia 1968, Poland 1981)⁶ when they deviated from the right ideological path, even if they presented no risk of military confrontation. Also, like the highly ideologized Mao Zedong, but not necessarily coordinated with him, he sponsored communist movements in other parts of the world (Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Angola, Mozambique, Guinea, Zambia...).

That is why the fall of communism prompted the allies to consider that with the discrediting and practical disappearance of the ideology that sustained it, the threat had disappeared as well, and they rushed to collect the "peace dividends" with considerable reductions in their defense budgets, forcing NATO itself to reduce its structure as well with a series of modifications from each of which emerged a Command Structure (NCS) simpler than the previous one. All except the allies (then mainly aspiring allies) who had belonged to the USSR or the Warsaw Pact, who, chastened by their own experience as those mentioned above, or close to others, pointed out that, even without the ideological substrate, the threat was still there, in the usual Russia. And the invasion of Ukraine proved them right years later, in an extravagant return to messianism that now, instead of trying to expand communist ideology, tries so to eliminate fascisms and

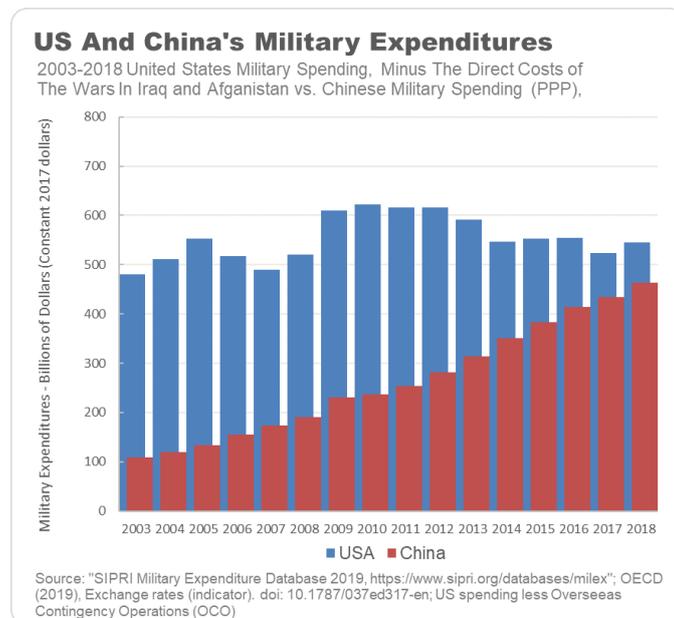
⁵ Although the Soviet Union is not mentioned in the Atlantic Treaty. Nor was it necessary.

⁶ The Warsaw Pact has been the only military alliance in history that has only invaded its own members.

supposedly neo-Nazi movements from the vicinity of Russia⁷, thus recovering a certain ideological base, now centered on the alleged virtues of autocracy as a political system, for it ensures social peace even at the expense of individual freedoms.

China in the world

The United States, for some years now, while sharing with the Europeans the (ephemeral) vision of a domesticated Russia, has taken a different path: instead of collecting the dividends of peace, it has identified a new opponent in China and with it the famous "Thucydides Trap"⁸ that ends up facing in war the established hegemony with the new growing power, see figure.



⁷ These supposedly principled statements that apply the consideration of fascism or Nazism to neighbors are clearly for internal consumption, because the less experienced external observer cannot but notice purely fascist characteristics precisely in the one who emits them, even if the one who suffers them is deaf and blind to them. The oppressive dominance of information, the autocratic system itself with its cult of leader and symbols, the fraudulent appeal to history, the apology of will and violence, the exacerbated nationalism... they are characteristic of those systems that are repeated today in certain autocracies, notably Russia and China.

⁸ Thucydides in his History of the Peloponnesian War established the principle that when a hegemonic power (in his case Sparta) perceives the rise of a rival (Athens) approaching its military power, war becomes inevitable.

China is certainly a communist regime, but not a proselytizing one. For reasons deeply intertwined in its millenary history, China, with the partial exception mentioned above of Mao's period, has as a rule not to intervene in the internal affairs of other countries, they simply profess the opinion that their system is the most efficient at organizing its own society while preserving social harmony, which is its fundamental concern, and as a result implicitly consider that its system may well be useless to others.

This is not to say that it does not seek to influence those others, of which there are plenty of examples, but only in matters immediately for economic purposes. Ideology is outside the framework of their foreign relations.

This famous U.S. Pacific pivot is not really new. During the Cold War, the Soviet threat was also felt in that area, with (or more frequently without) the support of the also communist but rival China. The geostrategic situation was however different from the current one, since being a single power the enemy the containment in a theater was valid for both. Now, however intimate the relationship between Russia and China is (and never has been) not necessarily a victory (diplomatic or military) in Russia will adversely affect Chinese aspirations. The opposite is also true in principle: an eventual settlement with China does not guarantee that Russia will follow the same path. But in terms of power, Russia is not even a shadow of the former USSR, from which it retains nothing but nuclear weaponry, while China has risen to the podium of world economic powers with second place.

On the other hand, the Chinese political system is in the trance of undergoing a major change: the 2018 legislative change that removed the limitation of the presidency to two consecutive terms, which will evidently be used by Xi Jinping to go well beyond his current 2023 limit, the evident cult of personality not unlike Mao Zedong's times, including the consecration of their thinking as part of party doctrine and the constitution, are leading the country into an autocratic system, where the collegial political command that prevailed with previous leaders is on its way to disappearing undermined by the Xi Jinping's unstoppable ascendancy.

Not only, then, does a power other than Russia appear in the Pacific, but its political system is also autocratic, and with an economic - and soon military - power that makes it a far more dangerous rival to democracies than the Soviet Union was, not because NATO nations or their partners will subvert, discrediting the democratic system or infecting its penchant for autocracy, but because its contempt for the norms admitted by everyone else (e.g., its interpretation of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea [UNCLOS] in the seas of its vicinity; or its "understanding" of the reasons – at least specious – that moved Russia to invade Ukraine) make it a power with which it is difficult to coexist. Friction occurs because the parameters it uses to assess interactions between states are radically different from those used by democracies, which are basically subjection to agreed rules and norms and respect for individual freedoms. For them, the rules are of no interest except insofar as they suit their ends. If in general international

relations throughout the world and at all times are governed and have been governed by national selfishness, for China this is so to a great extent. Moreover, the unpredictability inherent to autocratic systems, where opinions that do not coincide with those of the leader are despised, nullified, or simply not issued, confer on these systems a greater danger, not only because of the potentially mercurial nature of the leader's decisions, but because such systems tend to hide from him everything that may not be well received, thus the factors that must conform the decision are incomplete.

Friction points

The enormous Chinese imbrication in the global economy makes any conflict that includes it automatically take on a global character. There is no such thing as the possibility of a war limited to China or the Western Pacific area, but it would be a world conflict.

China has been carefully avoiding friction with other actors in its international relations. But his concept of what is international and what is internal does not exactly match ours. The possible independence of Taiwan, the most prominent potential source of conflict, is considered by China as a clearly domestic matter⁹, and for which it does not consider any interference from third parties acceptable. This opposition is why the US has consistently refused to give a formal guarantee to Taiwan, even though its political position is notoriously in favor of its independence, and that it would fall within the likelihood that it would be considered implicated if it were to escalate into armed confrontation¹⁰. But Japan, too, would probably consider itself involved in such a conflict, as Taiwan maintains excellent relations with Japan, thanks in part to considerable emigration from Taiwan to Japan, which has generated strong family ties, so a conflict between the "two Chinas" could implicate Japan directly. Otherwise, by simple family affinity (very important in Japanese culture), society might not understand to stand still.

Similarly, China's dispute with India over the possession of Aksai Chin in Kashmir, a region that China administers as its own and that India claims, is not considered by China to be the subject

⁹ However, and inevitably, ideological reasons do play in it – the individual freedom embraced by the Taiwanese in the face of the totalitarianism of the continental government – the first of which is difficult to understand for those whose only guide is organic efficiency and internal harmony, two values that on the contrary democracies put below freedom, respect for minorities and the rule of law.

¹⁰ Zbigniew Brzezinski, then President Carter's National Security Advisor, in 1978 recommended and obtained the severance of formal U.S. ties with Taiwan. Since then, the United States has maintained a position of ambiguity regarding its recognition as an independent nation. Recently, signs of greater assertiveness in the defense of Taiwan's independence are beginning to appear, mainly in personal and improvised statements by President Biden, which does not exactly contribute to improving relations between the PRC and the US.

of debate in any international forum, nor is the famous delimitation of the "nine strokes" in the China Seas, which violently ignores the provisions of UNCLOS and any judgment of its International Tribunal or the International Seabed Authority¹¹. The line of the "nine strokes" responds simply to the geographical reality of a myriad of atolls and small islands – mainly but not exclusively the Spratly and Paracelsus archipelagos – some, but not all, of disputed property, which China considers too close for its security if they are in the hands of others, thus giving them some domestic consideration. In this, it is not much different from Russia's concerns about near abroad, or, in words that seemed old-fashioned, the "sphere of influence" that gave so much talk to geostrategic treatisers of at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Either independently, or connected to the Taiwan dispute¹², the peculiar Chinese interpretation of UNCLOS may be a source of friction with other signatories. For example, navigation through the Taiwan Strait is considered by China to be not subject to the right of transit passage (Art. 38 UNCLOS) or innocent passage (Art. 21 et seq.)¹³. It should be noted that the provisions concerning such types of navigation are understood as intended to facilitate and shorten navigation within the logic of going from one point to another (e.g. in the case of the Taiwan Strait, from Da Nang, Vietnam, to Busan, South Korea, the passage through the Taiwan Strait shortens transit by about 200NM), while the US conducts operations affirming freedom of navigation (FONOPS) in which the object is merely to underline it, without connection to any commercial or economic need, which especially irritates China. To make matters worse, the US that correctly applies UNCLOS has never ratified it (the Senate consistently opposes it) making its legitimate claims very difficult, while China, which capriciously interprets it, is nonetheless one of the full signatories.

Traditionally, China has not sought to establish military bases abroad, in stark contrast to the US or Russia, with the sole partial exception of military facilities in Djibouti; but surprisingly it has recently reached an agreement with the Solomon Islands to provide logistical services to The People's Liberation Army Navy vessels. Few details are known of the agreement - mainly the price to be paid or paid is ignored - and if you heed the island government's statements it is far

¹¹ To be precise, the line of the "nine strokes" precedes the UNCLOS, but the signature and ratification of it did not make China withdraw the claim, before on the contrary over the years it has been propping it up with slight tweaks.

¹² Interestingly, the Republic of China (Taiwan) holds the same claim of the "nine strokes" as part of its legacy of the common past.

¹³ It has about 65 NM in the narrowest part, that is, considerably more than double the territorial sea (12 NM), so if Taiwan is considered independent they are international waters, and it is admitted that the island belongs to mainland China both articles apply. It should be added that the recent Spanish declaration of archipelagic waters around the Canary Islands, in clear violation of the UNCLOS that reserves them only for archipelagic states, harms our position, and by extension the European one, in this dispute.

from being a naval base, but there is no doubt that it is a worrying deviation from the norm so far followed. For the time being, this agreement has aroused considerable misgivings in other Pacific Governments, particularly that of Micronesia, which oppose this subtle expansionism, which is accompanied by technological colonization in the form of control and espionage of Internet networks and their submarine cables.

Implications for NATO of a conflict in Pacific area

The pertinent question, in the context of the problems that NATO may encounter over the next two or three decades, is whether the rise of autocrat Xi Jinping should be viewed by NATO as a challenge to the principles contained in the Washington Treaty that might require the application of Article 5. A priori, the Treaty marks very clear geographical boundaries, within which China is not remotely understood¹⁴. It will be argued that Afghanistan was not on those boundaries either, and yet NATO took over command and provision of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) forces, but it was under specific mandate from the United Nations, and it was about the economic and political reconstruction of a devastated nation and previously protecting international terrorism. None of those factors exist in a presumptive NATO mission in the Far East. In particular, a UN mandate, Afghanistan-style, is unthinkable in the first place because a similar situation in that area cannot be imagined. But there is also a formal reason that it would be vetoed by China in the Security Council, as is currently the case with all initiatives to condemn the Russian-vetoed invasion of Ukraine.

On the other hand, the US is by far the most prominent ally, and its leadership is strongly established for powerful reasons, and it will therefore be very difficult for the other allies to resist American pressures to take action in that theater, if it indeed proposes and needs it because of, for example, if the issue of Taiwan's independence could come to a critical stage¹⁵.

¹⁴ Art. 6: "For the purpose of Article 5 an armed attack on one or more of the Parties is deemed to include an armed attack on the territory of any of the Parties in Europe or North America, [...] on the islands under the jurisdiction of any Party in the North Atlantic area north of the Tropic of Cancer or on the vessels or aircraft in this area of any of the Parties". It is clear, then, that the North American (Guam, Marianas, Samoa, Midway, Palmira, Baker, Wake, etc.), French (q.v.) and English (Pitcairn, Diego García) possessions in the Pacific or the Indian Ocean are not protected by Art 5 (nor are Ceuta and Melilla anecdotally protected).

¹⁵ Only with great difficulties and at the cost of a painful internal rupture did the Atlantic Council manage to ignore the insistent calls of the United States for NATO to participate as such in the war in Iraq, this one not requested by the UN, which forced the US to create a coalition of the willing that included among others the United Kingdom and Spain, and which involved the transfer of numerous forces from the theatre of Afghanistan to the new and unnecessary of Iraq at a particularly critical time, which conditioned the Alliance's strategy in Afghanistan for the following years. The one who writes this was from 2004 to

For the moment, and despite different manifestations in recent years regarding the growing interest in the Indo-Pacific (the most explicit of which was President Obama's famous "pivot" to the Pacific), the US has not taken its concerns in that regard to NATO, no doubt aware that they would not be easily admitted, and has been solving its problems there with ad hoc alliances of lower level of commitment, like the QUAD¹⁶ (which exceptionally includes an Indian nation), Five Eyes¹⁷, the Five Power Defense Arrangement (FPDA)¹⁸ or more recently and controversially, the AUKUS¹⁹. If it did, however, it would not be the first time: after North Korea's invasion of South Korea in June 1950, NATO undertook a substantial reform of the force structure, requested for and obtained the appointment of General Dwight D. Eisenhower as Supreme Commander of Europe (SACEUR), which carried a powerful implicit message because of its undisputed prestige, and in the next revision of the Strategic Concept it enshrined the principle of "advanced defense" (forward strategy). Certainly all these actions fall far short of intervention, but the influence of Far Eastern affairs on NATO's strategy is thus well founded from the outset.

NATO for its part has recently begun (December 2020) to react to the concern of a mutual influence of situations on both sides of the world with the creation of a dialogue forum, not unlike in structure to the Mediterranean Dialogue²⁰, with four Asia-Pacific countries (Australia, Japan, Republic of Korea and New Zealand), the so-called AP4. The events of 2021 and 2022, which among other things have prompted three of the AP4 members (Australia, Japan and the Republic of Korea) to support the sanctions and other measures imposed on Russia by the European Union and the United States in punishment for the invasion of Ukraine, show the reciprocal perception that both theaters are not fully independent. Europe is thus not the only

2007 Director of the International General Staff of NATO, and vividly remembers how all the considerable energies of the organization were hijacked by the attention to the theater of Afghanistan, leaving little room to attend to other major crises or situations, and how the Atlantic Council was disturbed with unusual visits by U.S. congressmen and senators trying to persuade the nations represented there. Even without considering the legal aspects mentioned, attending to another theater of similar entity would have been excessive. Time has shown that NATO's refusal was correct, and the decision to invade Iraq has done tremendous reputational damage to the entire West.

¹⁶ Australia, India, Japan and the United States.

¹⁷ Australia, Canada, New Zealand, United States and the United Kingdom.

¹⁸ Australia, Malaysia, Singapore and New Zealand.

¹⁹ Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom. The controversy was due, more than to its constitution itself, to the fact that it has been accompanied by the rupture of a contract with France for the construction of conventional submarines to be replaced by nuclear-powered ones with the help of the other AUKUS partners.

²⁰ Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia.

regional power that looks with interest and concern at what is happening on the other side of the world.

What would be NATO's strategy in the event of a conflict in the Pacific theater?

It is a certainty that in the Strategic Concept, to be adopted in June, for the first time in NATO's already long list of Strategic Concepts there will be a mention of China, certainly not as a threat, but as an object at least of study and surveillance. However, the details of this consideration are still obscure. European allies have mixed opinions on what the goal of an Indo-Pacific strategy would be. Some candidates would be: to control the Chinese rise; to preserve the alliance with the US, a desire particularly perceptible in the easternmost allies, for reasons absolutely unrelated to the Indo-Pacific; ensuring free trade; and of course protect itself from the consequences of the Sino-American rivalry²¹; or counter China's strategic alignment with Russia, whose violation of all international norms by invading Ukraine – with China's tacit support – is undoubtedly NATO's first concern at the moment. It is therefore difficult to formulate a strategy that can satisfy all allies with these diverse and disparate objectives.

Another factor to consider is that, although a conflict with China would inevitably be global in scope, the theater of operations would probably be limited to that area, since China's powerful and growing military capabilities do not include expeditionary capability, consistent with the above in ideological terms. On the other hand, only a few of the allies have the ability to project forces in that scenario.

Types of operations in the event of a military confrontation

The iniquitous Russian invasion of Ukraine is making clear several observations that China will surely not fail to take note of, particularly those referring to the pitiful moral and material state of the Russian forces, which will lower their consideration as an ally or even as a follower. But there is one of universal application, which is the superiority of defensive warfare over offensive warfare. If this has always been true, certainly Von Clausewitz explains it abundantly, and more than one commentator has dared to assign figures (five or even ten attackers for each defender), it is no less true that this relative preponderance has historically varied according to the weapons and information systems available at the time. Even sometimes that preponderance has been reversed, as in the case of the *blitzkrieg* at the beginning of World War II.

²¹ Grare, Frédéric Levaillant, Méliissa et al, *Getting Real about the Indo-Pacific – Redefining European Approach to Maritime Security*. The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies March 2022. P. 4.

Today it seems evident that *loitering munitions*, the availability of near real-time intelligence on enemy movements, often using open means, the existence of a multitude of models of cheap anti-aircraft and anti-tank smart missiles, and in part autonomous aerial vehicles (drones) are factors that seem cut to the measure of guerrilla warfare, that is, defensive. And of course, the up until now successful Ukrainian strategies and tactics in this war attest to this.

A military confrontation in the Chinese "sphere of influence" would seem a priori to place the Chinese forces in a defensive attitude, because as seen above they have no designs of conquest beyond what they already consider their own, and in any case neither of both hypothetical contenders, although allies are included in the calculation, has the ability to bring war to the heart of enemy territory. But it is likely that such a hypothetical confrontation would have aero naval characteristics, although not in a strict sense, since it does not seem that the decision could be reached in a naval combat between the two powerful fleets, in the Battle of Jutland style, which also did not decide the war²². And the first war that has been decided exclusively by air means is yet to happen, an assertion for which the Kosovo war, NATO against Serbia, is not a credible refutation.

The observation of the defense programs of the powers of the area give a clear indication of what they fear or expect: the People's Republic of China has two aircraft carriers in service (*Liaoning* and *Shandong*, both STOBAR²³) and one under construction, probably with catapult (CATOBAR) which will boost its embarked aviation, in addition to two more planned, one of them possibly nuclear-powered; Japan is transforming the curiously named «helicopter destroyers» *Izumo* and *Kaga* into aircraft carriers (STOVL) that will be equipped with fifth-generation F-35B aircraft; the Republic of Korea is building a 45,000Tm, also STOVL and equipped with F-35B; Australia is contemplating modifying its two LHDs, designed on our Juan Carlos I, into STOVL aircraft carriers with F-35Bs²⁴. Add to this that neighboring India has two STOBAR aircraft carriers, *Vikrant* and *Vikramaditya*, that the US has permanently deployed in Japan the nuclear aircraft carrier CATOBAR *Ronald Reagan* and the LHA *America*, in addition to four other aircraft carriers, one LHA and three LHD on its west coast, and that both the United

²² Although according to Churchill, Admiral Jellicoe, Commander of the Grand Fleet, was the only man on both sides who could have lost the war in an afternoon, an accurate judgment that could be replicated in this case if such a confrontation could take place.

²³ STOBAR = Short Takeoff, Barrier Arrested Recovery, considered the least efficient and safe of aircraft carrier take-off and take-off systems. The others are: STOVL = Short Takeoff, Vertical Landing, and CATOBAR = Catapult Takeoff, Barrier Arrested Recovery, the most effective of all systems in terms of both safety and tempo of air operations and aircraft capacity. Amphibious assault ships with air capabilities, such as the LHA and LHD, are generally STOVL.

²⁴ Incomprehensibly, the Government of Spain has not authorized even to explore the purchase of the F-35B, which is the only possibility of retaining the VSTOL capacity when the Harrier AV-8B reaches the end of its operational life (2024).

Kingdom and France have recently made an appearance in the area on several occasions with their respective aircraft carriers *Queen Elisabeth* (STOVL) and *Charles de Gaulle* (CATOBAR), and it will be seen that the concerns of the powers in presence or with interests in the area seem to be alleviated by the projection of naval power.

It is notorious that the Chinese Armed Forces have grown enormously in recent years, but the other side of the coin is that they do not have the *solera* of American or European forces, hardened in wars for centuries²⁵. This is especially significant in the naval field, where the deadlines for design, construction, experimentation, and training of naval units do not allow improvisation or rapid progress. See on the next graphic what was said above about the development of their aircraft carriers, each of which, built at a frantic pace, corrects important design problems of the predecessors, and yet never seems free of them.

		OTAN		China	India	Japón	Rusia
		Europa	EEUU				
Disuasión	SSBN	8	14	6	1		11
Proyección de poder	SSN + SGN	12	50	12	1		27
	Portaviones (grande)	3	11	2 (+3)	2		1 (inop.)
	Cruceros		22				5
	Destruyores	44	67	36	10	40	14
	Anfibios (LHD, LHA, LPD, LSD)	15	33	7	1	3	
	Inf de Marina (Bdas Expedicionarias)	4	8	2			1
	Aviones de combate (embarcados)	119	1381	381	45		88
Aprovisionamiento (combustible, sólidos)		40	60	16	4	5	34
Negación del mar (SSK)		45		59	14	21	23
Control del mar	Portaviones (STOVL)	3				(+2)	
	Fragatas	73	35	49	13	6	12
	Corbetas + OPV	61		50	24		47
	MHO/MSO	149	11	38	1	23	47
	MPA/MSA	110	150	10	42	95	58

Fuente: *Europe and the Sea - A Continuing Story*. Dymock, A. et al.

²⁵ Professor Huntington wrote: "The West won the world not by the superiority of its ideas or values or religion [...] but rather by its superiority in applying organised violence. Westerners often forget this fact; non-Westerners never do" (Huntington, Samuel P., *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*. Touchstone (Simon & Schuster Inc) 1996 p.51); and also the radical political philosopher Frantz Fanon: "Europe's well-being and progress were built with the sweat and corpses of blacks, Arabs, Indians and Asians" (quoted from *The Wretched of the Earth* (Les damnés de la terre), Frantz Fanon, tr. Richard Philcox, New York 1963, p. 53, in Holland, Tom, *Dominion, The Making of the Western Mind*, Little, Brown 2019, p.520)

Possession of the atolls

The probable Chinese strategy, which has been characterized as *anti-access/area denial* (A2/AD), would be based on the defense of the double chain of islands that includes atolls and uninhabitable rocks, approximately perimeter by the line of the "nine strokes", to which have been added facilities such as docks, airstrips and other elements that have turned them into elements of a bastion that protects the East Sea and the South Sea of China. Both seas, according to this strategy, would be converted into authentic Chinese lakes.

Two types of intertwined battles can therefore be expected: the naval air battle focused on the American side on the attacks of the aircraft embarked on its formidable aircraft carriers (the air-sea battle, considered as the adversarial strategy of the A2/AD) and the defense of these against attacks by submarines and especially by land-launched missiles²⁶, carried out by its powerful destroyers equipped among other things with anti-ballistic missile defense (BMD)²⁷; and the amphibious war of assaults on the atolls and other more or less artificial islands with the aim of piercing that defensive bastion, carried out by the amphibious forces whose core are the LHA and LHD also with their embarked aviation. All this constitutes an eminently aero naval war, for which NATO, if it participates, would be reasonably well prepared with its LHA/LHD and other amphibious assault ships with its integral landing forces, of which the exemplary Anglo-Dutch Amphibious Force (UKNLAFF), the Hispano-Italian Amphibious Force (SIAF), of entity of one brigade each stand out, and the French with a landing capacity of two *Infanterie de Marine* brigades. In addition, its numerous frigates and other escort ships would play an essential role in protecting the main forces against attack submarines and other threats.

The Indian theatre

Consistent with what was explained above about the meaning of the Indian Ocean for the East Asian powers, for NATO the Indian Ocean is an important channel of communication with Asia and the Persian Gulf. Disputes and disputes in the area, particularly the one that has long pitted India against Pakistan, have little relevance to NATO's strategy, even though it could trigger a nuclear exchange.

²⁶ According to some observers, China has developed anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBM) with maneuverable re-entry warheads, which it has tested in 2020. Although there is no reliable record of their capabilities, this raises significant questions about the vulnerability of aircraft carriers.

²⁷ Another inexplicable Spanish shortcoming is that of not having completed the BMD capability of its Álvaro de Bazán-class frigates, for which the combat system is prepared requiring only some changes to the software and SM-3 missiles.

It should be mentioned, however, that both rivals are respectively politically aligned with Russia and China, which introduces a disruptive factor in the recent improvement in relations between the latter two. The relationship between India and Russia is old and seems to have been entrenched; the one linking Pakistan to China has recently been boosted by an OBOR-like initiative called the *China-Pakistan Economic Corridor* (CPEC) that allows China to connect with the Western Indian Ocean via pipelines through Pakistan in exchange for military technology. This quadrilateral of interests, in which all four sides are nuclear powers, could become a serious source of instability, and turn the regional into the global.

As far as maritime traffic is concerned, in particular that of energy (crude oil and LNG) linking the Strait of Hormuz with Bab-el-Mandeb and feeding Europe through Suez has not been the subject of geopolitical threats in recent years (if one ignores wars and other intra-Persian Gulf incidents). However, in 2008 the hitherto growing piratic activity brought about by Somali misrule reached an unacceptable limit. The UN Security Council issued several resolutions (UNSCR 1814, 1816, 1838 and 1846) authorizing the intervention of the powers concerned to end this scourge, including intervention on land if deemed necessary (UNSCR 1851). NATO responded first with operations *Allied Provider* and *Allied Protector*, respectively to protect UN Food Program (WFP) vessels and to combat piracy in general. Both were replaced by Operation Ocean Shield with both missions, starting in 2009. As the US simultaneously launched its own national operation *Task Force 151, Ocean Shield* was left with only the European contribution, in conflict with the European Union which also launched its Operation Atalanta (later called *EU NAVFOR Somalia*) which attracted more contributions. China, Japan, India and others, including Taiwan, sent forces operating with their own national commands. When the piratic threat was fading, the forces also withdrew, with *EU NAVFOR Somalia* being the most persistent, and is still in force today.

It is noteworthy that in the face of a non-State threat, alien to ideologies, and which affects maritime traffic, on which all national economies depend, all the nations affected and with the means to do so agree to cooperate, which instills a certain optimism for the future of that theater.

Conclusions

NATO's involvement in potential conflicts in the Indian and Pacific theaters, or if you prefer in the Indo-Pacific, is far from automatic. However, the possibility exists, mainly due to the rise of China, first of all in economic power combined with unacceptable strategies, which include disinformation actions and always contentious rhetoric, which shows hostility to everything Western, and which have become particularly remarkable on the occasion of the reprehensible invasion of Ukraine by Russia, an issue on which China has adopted a dialectical position of support for the aggressor, in clear opposition to the Allied position, although it is true that it

has refrained from providing material aid. But more alarming than its economic rise and influence in the world is the spectacular increase in its military capabilities, which although still qualitatively inferior to those of the United States has the worrying characteristic that it is not perceived what is its limit or what is the strategic objective that guides that growth.

It is not, therefore, unthinkable that this attitude could lead to an armed confrontation. The U.S. has developed an unparalleled power projection capacity. Its superiority in attack ballistic and nuclear missile submarines, CATOBAR aircraft carriers, cruisers, destroyers, amphibious assault ships and marine corps forces, and embarked fighter jets, surpass not only the Chinese Navy (PLAN) but all others combined, giving the US a preponderant role in the Pacific theater, even if he had to divide his attention with a simultaneously agitated European theater.

As for the European allies, their accumulated naval capabilities are more oriented to sea control. SSK submarines, destroyers, frigates and corvettes, mine action vessels, and maritime patrol aircraft, all of them more numerous and of better quality than those of potential adversaries, would allow them to form a force comfortably capable of protecting vital maritime traffic in the Indian Ocean and Strait of Malacca, as well as supporting a hypothetical American deployment in the Pacific, help that predictably the Americans will not stop requesting if the contingency arises.

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