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## PROBLEM AREAS OF THE SCHOLARSHIP ON CHINA'S MARITIME POLICY IN CONTEMPORARY INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS STUDIES

YAO ZENGYI<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Belarusian State University, 4 Niezaliezhnasci Avenue, Minsk 220030, Belarus

**Abstract.** This study explores the degree of the scholarly examination of China's maritime policy within modern political science. Through this analysis, several key problem areas have been identified: the influence of China's historical perception as a regional leader on its maritime policy, the evaluation of China's naval capabilities, the foundational role of foreign policy principles for China's maritime strategy, the consensus among international relations theorists that the intensification of China's maritime policy is partly driven by US–China rivalry in the Asia–Pacific region, and the territorial disputes in the South China Sea as a primary source of regional instability. The study also proposes a new inquiry into the historical and contemporary contexts of China's maritime policy evolution in the Asia–Pacific region, highlighting specific factors that shape the contemporary understanding of maritime security.

**Keywords:** China's maritime policy; maritime security concept; international relations; Asia–Pacific region; military modernisation; naval forces; territorial disputes.

## НАПРАВЛЕНИЯ АНАЛИЗА МОРСКОЙ ПОЛИТИКИ КИТАЯ В СОВРЕМЕННЫХ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯХ ПО МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫМ ОТНОШЕНИЯМ

ЯО ЦЗЭНИ<sup>1)</sup>

<sup>1)</sup>Белорусский государственный университет, пр. Независимости, 4, 220030, г. Минск, Беларусь

**Аннотация.** Оценивается степень научной разработанности вопроса о морской политике Китая в современной политической науке. Выделены направления в исследовании морской политики Китая: изучение морской политики Китая сквозь призмы исторически сложившегося восприятия государства как регионального лидера, оценка потенциала военно-морских сил Китая, определение внешнеполитических принципов, на которых выстраивается общее стратегическое позиционирование страны, в качестве основ морской политики, установление согласованности позиций исследователей об активизации морской политики Китая за счет американо-китайского соперничества в Азиатско-Тихоокеанском регионе, придание территориальному спору в Южно-Китайском море статуса конфликта, способствующего региональной нестабильности. Обоснована постановка новой научной проблемы, касающейся интерпретации исторического и современного контекстов эволюции морской политики Китая в Азиатско-Тихоокеанском регионе, с вычленением ее влияния на формирование современной концепции морской безопасности.

**Ключевые слова:** морская политика Китая; концепция морской безопасности; международные отношения; Азиатско-Тихоокеанский регион; военная модернизация; военно-морские силы; территориальные споры.

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### Автор:

**Яо Цзэни** – аспирант кафедры международных отношений факультета международных отношений. Научный руководитель – доктор политических наук, профессор Ю. И. Малевич.

### Author:

**Yao Zengyi**, postgraduate student at the department of international relations, faculty of international relations.  
yao.zengyi@bk.ru

## Introduction

As China continues to expand its influence, scholars are increasingly focusing on various aspects of its foreign policy. The relevance of China's foreign policy is underscored by the strengthening of bilateral ties with other states and Beijing's growing influence within international organisations. This trend has led researchers to look deeper into specific areas of Chinese policy. However, amidst numerous dissertations, monographs, and analytical reports, it remains challenging to synthesise existing research and identify gaps that have yet to be addressed.

In Belarusian scholarship, China's maritime policy is one of the least explored facets of its foreign policy. China's maritime policy is evolving in response to other nations' efforts to contain China's growth and emerging threats to its ascent. To enhance its relations

with China, it is crucial for Belarus to comprehend the complex aspects of China's contemporary foreign policy. Consequently, a thorough examination of China's maritime policy, particularly concerning regional stability, is imperative.

In preparing this study, the author selected seminal works on China's foreign policy, with a particular focus on historical and contemporary aspects of its maritime strategy. The analysis of these key studies has yielded significant conclusions for the field of international relations.

The primary objective of this article is to identify methodological approaches to studying Chinese maritime policy within modern political science. The analysis draws on representative studies by scholars who have extensively examined China's maritime policies.

## Materials and methods

The research employed a range of methodologies, including specialised historical and comparative historical methods, a system approach, content analysis, scenario planning, the principle of historicism, expert assessments, as well as general scientific methods such as

synthesis, comparison, and analogy. The study addresses a novel scientific problem: interpreting the historical and contemporary contexts of China's maritime policy evolution in the Asia – Pacific region and identifying factors influencing the modern concept of maritime security.

## Results and discussion

The first problem area involves examining the development of China's maritime policy and its current positioning within the regional security framework, particularly concerning the modernisation of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). China's maritime policy, like its broader foreign policy, is deeply intertwined with its historical legacy. Scholars such as L. Jacobson and R. Medcalf have highlighted the connections between historical events and contemporary Chinese politics. Their analysis suggests that China's perception of its foreign policy goals is heavily influenced by its prolonged period of weakness starting in the 1840s when foreign powers divided China and subjected its people to numerous humiliations. The Communist Party of China (CCP) derives much of its legitimacy from its claim to have rescued China from foreign domination, vowing never again to allow external powers to dictate China's future [1, p. 7]. Consequently, China's concept of maritime security is predicated on the notion that it should not be subordinate to any other state and that its maritime security policies should be autonomously determined.

This finding is corroborated by historical narratives enshrined in the Constitution of the People's Republic of China and their interpretation by contemporary Chinese leadership: "After 1840, feudal China gradually became a semi-colonial, semi-feudal country. The Chinese people

ple, wave upon wave, waged heroic struggles for national independence and liberation and for democracy and freedom. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, momentous historical changes took place in China. The Revolution of 1911, led by Sun Yat-sen, abolished the feudal monarchy and gave birth to the Republic of China. However, the historic mission of the Chinese people to oppose imperialism and feudalism was not yet accomplished. In 1949, after prolonged and arduous struggles, both armed and otherwise, the Chinese people, under the leadership of the Communist Party of China and chairman Mao Zedong, successfully overthrew the reign of imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucratic capitalism. This monumental victory in the New Democratic Revolution led to the establishment of the People's Republic of China, empowering the Chinese people to become masters of their own destiny"<sup>1</sup>.

Chinese international affairs scholar Wu Xiaoyan observes a significant intensification in maritime security policies after 2012, coinciding with China's ambition to become a major maritime power. The primary objective is to safeguard national maritime sovereignty and ensure the secure and uninterrupted operation of maritime communication routes. Effective maritime security necessitates substantial sea power; thus, China is compelled to develop a formidable and modern navy that aligns with its international stature and can protect its maritime interests. Without such protection, the en-

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<sup>1</sup>Constitution of the People's Republic of China [Electronic resource]. URL: [https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/lawsregulations/201911/20/content\\_WS5ed8856ec6d0b3f0e9499913.html](https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/lawsregulations/201911/20/content_WS5ed8856ec6d0b3f0e9499913.html) (date of access: 14.03.2024).

tire concept of becoming a maritime power is rendered meaningless [2, p. 8].

To realise its goal of becoming a preeminent maritime power and fortify its maritime security framework, China is modernising the PLAN. Russian researcher A. V. Gubin notes that driven by extensive economic reforms and the imperative to safeguard national interests since the late 1980s, China has been striving to create naval forces capable of operating on the high seas. This marks a transition from merely defending coastal areas to ensuring comprehensive security both nearshore and offshore [3, p. 187]. Consequently, China is not only establishing a regional but also a global maritime security system. On the global stage, China aims to forge alliances with friendly states that recognise it as a key partner in maritime security. An illustrative example is China's attempt to cultivate a new relationship with the Solomon Islands, centred on enhancing regional maritime security in Oceania.

The ongoing modernisation of the Chinese navy is addressed in the study "The Chinese navy: expanding capabilities, evolving roles". The authors highlight that surface combat vessels, amphibious assault ships, and aircraft carriers are integral to broader Chinese military modernisation goals. These vessels can be deployed for port calls, routine missions, humanitarian aid, and disaster relief operations. Additionally, surface ships, supported by land-based naval aviation and submarines, could be utilised to land troops on contested islands or atolls, thereby bolstering Chinese diplomacy in maritime territorial disputes [4, p. 168].

The modernisation of the Chinese navy in recent years has progressed at a rapid pace, drawing on the experiences of Western countries. The Chinese military is upgrading the aircraft carriers acquired from other nations and enhancing the capabilities of warships. In 2017, China unveiled its first domestically-built aircraft carrier called "Shandong".

The significance of maritime strategy in the foreign policy of China in the 21<sup>st</sup> century was analysed by Yu. V. Manuylova. By examining key government documents, including white papers, the researcher identified the primary objectives of China's maritime policy:

- protection of maritime rights and interests;
- development and modernisation of naval forces;
- resolution of territorial disputes in the South China Sea, East China Sea, and Taiwan Strait [5, p. 132–133].

The analysis of government documents is crucial for a systematic understanding of China's maritime policy. These publications outline China's strategic goals for developing its national maritime sector.

The monograph "China's maritime security strategy: the evolution of a growing sea power", edited by E. Sing and Yue Chan, elucidates the development of Chinese maritime security policy from Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping. Each generation of Chinese leaders has

shaped the overarching direction of maritime security strategy. Over four decades, China has prioritised territorial integrity, national development, and regional and international maritime cooperation [6]. The approach to maritime security has evolved significantly, with China now aspiring to become a prominent maritime power.

Sun Tom Guozui and A. Payette have examined various facets of Chinese maritime policy. They introduced the concept "two oceans" to characterise China's maritime strategy since the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. This concept underscores the strategic importance of the Pacific and Indian oceans in China's quest to become a global power. The authors argue that the PLAN is pivotal in achieving this objective. In the Pacific, China's political ambitions face challenges such as the American presence in South Korea and Japan, territorial disputes with Vietnam, the Philippines, and Japan, and the Taiwan issue. Therefore, Sun Tom Guozui and A. Payette emphasise the necessity for the PLAN to operate effectively in the Pacific Ocean [7, p. 5]. The Indian Ocean represents the next frontier for China's maritime power projection.

China's initiatives to ensure regional economic and security stability in East Asia are examined in the study by Ge Jianhua and Pu Jingyi. The construction of the maritime Silk Road, proposed by China, leverages the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Silk Road fund to develop railways, pipelines, and multiple trade corridors in countries along the route [8, p. 77]. According to Ge Jianhua and Pu Jingyi, the economic integration of these states into Chinese policy within the Asia – Pacific region could gradually resolve contentious maritime security issues [8, p. 77].

The dissertation by Chen Jinling highlights the importance of stable economic ties for maritime security, using the Strait of Malacca as a case study. Chen Jinling argues that escalating conflicts and piracy in the strait could severely impact the Chinese economy, particularly in terms of oil trade [9, p. 39]. Consequently, the author suggests that China should reduce its dependence on this crucial maritime passage. Nonetheless, the Strait of Malacca is likely to remain a vital artery for the Chinese economy and a key aspect of regional security.

Current studies on international relations and Chinese foreign policy portray the evolution of China's maritime strategy as a constant. Historically, China has transitioned from a nation subjected to external humiliation to an autonomous actor capable of shaping regional order. The ambition to transform the country into a major maritime power signifies a shift in the country's regional positioning.

Another significant area focuses on the conflict in the South China Sea and its impact on China's maritime security strategy. Chinese scholarly literature extensively addresses territorial disputes in this region. The conflict, driven by competing claims from ASEAN member states over islands in the South China Sea, significantly

influences Chinese maritime policy. Xie Zhihai identifies the reasons behind China's naval expansion, linking it to escalating tensions in adjacent seas. As China asserts its maritime interests more directly, territorial disputes in both the South and East China seas have intensified. The future international order in East Asia will likely be shaped by the maritime strategies and policies of regional states and external powers. China has long advocated for a peaceful rise, claiming that its ascent would not conflict with other nations' interests. However, its ambitious maritime policies have raised concerns in Japan, the US, and Southeast Asian countries. Xie Zhihai suggests that China will continue to bolster its naval capabilities [10, p. 120].

Researcher A. V. Gubin synthesises various scientific perspectives on the East Asian regional security complex and the challenges of maritime control in the South China Sea. He frames the South China Sea as a theatre of Sino-American rivalry, where some ASEAN member states align with Washington, while others seek compromise with China [11, p. 132]. Numerous scholars also examine China's maritime policy within the broader context of Sino-American competition for influence in the Asia – Pacific region. M. A. Tersikh asserts that "the US strategy in the Asia – Pacific region cannot overlook China, whose growing power challenges America's global dominance" [12, p. 32]. Yu. A. Manuylova views the intensification of China's maritime policy as a manifestation of the geopolitical clash between the US and China [13].

The interest of the US in reshaping its partnerships within the Asia–Pacific region is undoubtedly driven by concerns over Beijing's rapid economic and political ascent. This strategic pivot towards Asian states has provoked clear discontent in China. By the early 2010s, China had established robust economic partnerships with numerous regional states, and the potential erosion of its influence in the Asia–Pacific region became a pressing foreign policy issue during the leadership of Hu Jintao and subsequently Xi Jinping.

Unresolved territorial disputes over islands in the South China Sea and East China Sea hinder the development of comprehensive and trusting cooperation between China and other Asia – Pacific nations. China faces competing sovereignty claims from several ASEAN member states over the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, involving Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Additionally, China and Vietnam contest control over the Paracel Islands, while China and Japan dispute sovereignty over the Diaoyu (Diaoyudao) Islands in the

East China Sea. China's claims to these territories are underpinned by their strategic importance for national security. The current Chinese leadership advocates for a peaceful resolution of these disputes through diplomatic channels and supports establishing codes of conduct in the South China Sea.

Dissertation "The impact of territorial disputes in the South China Sea on Vietnamese-Chinese relations" by E. I. Narkhova addresses these contentious issues. The Vietnamese-Chinese relationship serves as a particularly illustrative case for identifying conflicting approaches to determining the status of disputed islands.

The dissertation's assertion that the militarisation of the South China Sea, coupled with China's overwhelming geopolitical, military, and economic dominance over Vietnam, "forces it to seek allies against China to defend its interests, thereby complicating the search for compromise" highlights the divergence of positions within the ASEAN itself [14, p. 161].

Malaysia's role in regional stability further illuminates the contradictions between China's and ASEAN's approaches to maritime security. A.S.Korolev's dissertation explores this topic by rethinking the foreign policy strategies of small and medium powers within the framework of neoclassical realism that means specifically, contiguity and hedging. The scientist identifies the main structural limitations of these existing approaches using Malaysia as a case study [15, p. 19].

Under the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> generations of Chinese leadership, China's maritime policy has become more proactive, extending beyond merely ensuring economic growth. Several factors have driven this rethinking of the maritime dimension in Chinese foreign policy, which also poses challenges to China's aspiration to become a great maritime power. Firstly, the increased conflict potential around the islands in the South China Sea necessitates China's search for new energy sources amid its rapid economic and industrial growth. Competing claims from neighbouring ASEAN states compel China to assert its sovereignty over these islands. Secondly, Taiwan's status significantly influences regional security dynamics. The expansion of the US influence in the Asia – Pacific region through its close ties with Taiwan has prompted China to adopt a more cautious and comprehensive approach to resolving the Taiwan issue while criticising American interference in its internal affairs. Since the founding of China, all Chinese leaders have maintained that Taiwan's status is a domestic matter and should not be subject to international discourse [16, p. 575].

## Conclusions

Based on the analysis of scholarly research on China's maritime policy, it is evident that this policy is a strategically vital component of the nation's foreign agenda, aimed at safeguarding national maritime sovereignty.

In examining the maritime policy of China, political scientists have identified the following problem areas:

- the influence of China's historical perception as a regional leader on its maritime policy;
- an analysis of the capabilities of China's naval forces;
- the establishment of foreign policy principles as the foundation for China's maritime strategy;



- the consensus among scholars about the intensification of China's maritime policy that is partly driven by US – China rivalry in the Asia – Pacific region;
- the identification of territorial disputes in the South China Sea as a major factor contributing to regional instability.

This research indicates that the issue of Chinese maritime security in the Asia – Pacific region remains underexplored. A promising avenue for future research involves

interpreting the historical and contemporary contexts of China's maritime policy evolution and identifying the factors shaping its modern maritime security concept.

Undoubtedly, China's maritime policy will consider regional security concerns, aiming to resolve disputes peacefully and mitigate military tensions in the Asia – Pacific region. Nonetheless, China will continue to shape its maritime security strategy based on its priorities and interests.

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