NUOVA ANTOLOGIA MILITARE
RIVISTA INTERDISCIPLINARE DELLA SOCIETÀ ITALIANA DI STORIA MILITARE

NAM - Strategic History issue 1

November 2026

edited by DAVIDE BORSANI



Società Italiana di Storia Militare

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Nuova Antologia Militare

Rivista interdisciplinare della Società Italiana di Storia Militare

Periodico telematico open-access annuale (www.nam-sism.org)

Registrazione del Tribunale Ordinario di Roma n. 06 del 30 Gennaio 2020

Scopus List of Accepted Titles October 2022 (No. 597)

Rivista scientifica ANVUR (5/9/2023) Area 11, Area 10 (21/12/2024)



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For the Journal: © Società Italiana di Storia Militare

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Grafica: Nadir Media Srl - Via Giuseppe Veronese, 22 - 00146 Roma

info@nadirmedia.it

Gruppo Editoriale Tab Srl -Viale Manzoni 24/c - 00185 Roma

www.tabedizioni.it

ISSN: 2704-9795

ISBN Fascicolo 979-12-5669-553-9

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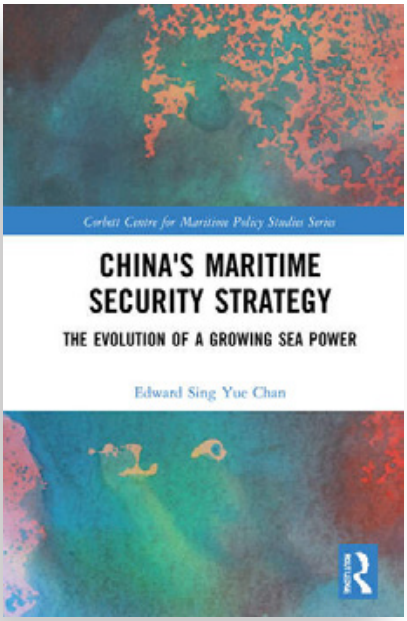
Jean-François Rosset (1703/1706-1786), Buste de Montesquieu, Collection Adolphe Thiers. Musée du Louvre, Aile Richelieu. Photo Siren-Com, 2009, CC BY SA 3.0 Unported. Wikimedia Commons.

Montesquieu's *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence* (1734) represents the first instance of "philosophical history" applied to international relations—a work in which history is no longer merely a reconstruction of military and diplomatic episodes, but an interpretation of social factors and long-term historical processes. This book, which has recently been brought to the attention of scholars in the field of strategic studies by Jakub Grygiel (Orbis, 63:4, Fall 2019: 582–607) and John Stone (*Journal of Strategic Studies,* 46:6–7, 2023: 1460–1481), can also be considered the first modern example of "strategic history."

Edward Sing Yue Chan,

China's Maritime Security Strategy: *The Evolution of a Growing Sea Power*

London and New York, Routledge, 2022



This work by Edward Sing Yue Chan explores the forty-year transformation of China's maritime security strategy from a limited coastal defence focus to an assertive global sea power. What the author is focused on is how strategic guidelines from successive leaders – from Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping – have developed throughout the years. The text analyses the roles of domestic actors, such as the People's Liberation Army Navy and the China Coast Guard, so that it frames a shift towards safeguarding maritime rights and interests in the Indo-Pacific. In a few words, the sources provide a framework for understanding China's modern sea power as a multidimensional force which aims at

NAM, Strategic History
DOI: 10.36158/979125669553918
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the same time at being both cooperative and assertive, therefore showing a comprehensive analysis of Beijing's transition from a continental power with limited maritime interests to an assertive global sea power.

The book is structured chronologically, through four generations of Chinese leadership from 1978 to 2020. The monograph is divided into seven chapters, beginning with a theoretical and historical foundation. In particular, the first introductory chapter sets the stage by questioning why China has shifted from a constrained to a more assertive maritime strategy. The second chapter establishes the book's analytical framework by exploring the evolution of the concept of maritime security in both Western and Chinese contexts. The author identifies five key components that tracked throughout the subsequent chapters: strategic guidelines, policy discussion, capability building, strategic framework, and policy implementation. What strikes the reader's attention is that even before the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949 had the Republic of China's government claimed sovereignty right in the South China Sea (p. 12).

The chronological structure of the book starts with chapter three, dealing with Deng Xiaoping and describing a period of limited maritime security agenda. In a few words, it was under Deng's leadership that a structural naval strategy was set. As far as this was concerned, Liu Huaqing, the commander of the Chinese Navy from 1982 to 1988, emphasised the importance of a sufficient maritime defence capability, so that the near sea active defence strategy could be set up. In a broader context, Liu Huaqing's near sea active defence strategy proposed that China's strategic selective engagement in national defence should focus on the near sea (pp. 46-47). The following chapter marks Jiang Zemin's era, with the introduction of the concept of protecting maritime rights and interests. What the author highlights about Jiang's Administration is that China's economic interactions and trade with the outside world increased and sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) became gradually important, which included access to overseas resources (especially oil and gas), the safety of commercial cargos, and the trading relationship with African and European countries (p. 73). The fifth chapter covers Hu Jintao's Era, when the objective of constructing a strong sea power was first mentioned in official documents. What is of paramount importance is the so-called "Malacca dilemma", referring to China's dependency on the Malacca Strait for its energy supply and SLOCs (p. 95). The historic missions of the new century, therefore, showed that China began to address a greater variety of security issues

not involving direct confrontation with neighbouring countries. In a few words, China's maritime security strategy had to show a cooperative and responsible growing power (p. 99).

Xi Jinping shaped the so-called China Dream involving the construction of a strong maritime power. At this point, Beijing had developed a more assertive attitude towards national interests, which resulted in aggressive moves such as land reclamation in the South China Sea. However, the author outlines that becoming a major power suggests that China should engage more with international politics, thus aiming at advocating itself regionally and internationally and become a strong sea power (p. 140). In a nutshell, greater responsibility had finally been assigned to the Navy in order to demonstrate China's legitimacy as a sea power by participating in both traditional and non-traditional security issues (p. 167). The final chapter synthesises the findings, reinforcing the factors that consistently drive China's maritime security strategy. In particular, reactions from other countries on Beijing's construction of sea power are assessed, as nations like the US, Australia, Japan, India, Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines have perceived that China's ascent is a potential security threat. In light of this, the formulation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, commonly known as the Quad, with the United States, Australia, India, and Japan, is regarded as a response to balance the PRC's overseas expansion in the afore mentioned area and as an evidence of containment of Beijing's maritime power (p. 194). A central theme of the monograph is the technological and operational evolution of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). The author uses the concepts of Brown, Green, and Blue navy to illustrate this progression. In the Deng era, the PLAN was characterised as a Brown-water Navy, being only capable of operations along the coastline or inshore. The transition to a Green-water Navy began in the Jiang and Hu eras. As a matter of fact, at the dawn of the XXI century the Far Eastern country had developed significant near-sea capabilities to maintain a sea-denial capacity within the regional waters of the East and South China Seas. Finally, under Xi Jinping the goal shifted towards building a Blue-water Navy, which Chan describes as a world-class navy capable of global reach.

According to the sources, Edward Sing Yue Chan identifies four major factors that have consistently driven and shaped the 40-year development of China's maritime security strategy. First of all, National Strategic Guidelines, according to which maritime security strategy is viewed as a subset of China's grand strat-

egy depending on the primary national objectives of a specific leadership generation. Having said that, actors like the People's Liberation Army Navy, the State Oceanic Administration (SOA), the China Coast Guard (CCG), and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), compete for resources and propose different policy directions based on their institutional interests. What is also pivotal to underline is that Chan's work occupies a unique space between International Relations (IR) studies and the History of International Relations scholarship. In actual fact, while the book is deeply informed by IR theory, the author intends to move beyond international relations theory (p. x) to provide a more comprehensive understanding of Chinese politics. Chan begins the second chapter by evaluating four major IR theories, that is offensive realism, defensive realism, constructivism, and organisation theory, and their ability to explain Chinese behaviour. Chan's stance is that no single theory is sufficient to explain forty years of development. Instead, he adopts a framework emphasising the practical adaptation of resources to attain political goals. The book leans heavily into the History of International Relations by providing a detailed, chronological narrative of how China's maritime policy has evolved through specific leadership shifts and historical events. By analysing the strategic guidelines of each leadership generation, the author treats the history of the Chinese Communist Party's evolving worldview as the primary driver of maritime policy, rather than just abstract systemic pressures.

As far as originality and the use of sources is concerned, the research is notable for its extensive use of primary and secondary Chinese-language sources. As an evidence of this, suffice it to quote a few official documents such as Five-Year Plans (FYPs), National Defense White Papers (NDWPs), and leader's speech collections. Furthermore, there are Military and Government Media, that is articles from *People's Navy*, *Modern Navy*, and the *PLA Daily* providing facts on policy implementation and missions. The author concludes that China has successfully developed into a comprehensive sea power characterised by a multidimensional and often complicated strategy. In this way Chan states that this evolution was driven by four consistent factors: central strategic guidelines, the involvement of domestic actors, the expansion of maritime defense capability, and the prioritisation of national interests. As an outcome of this, the Dragon now possesses dual maritime identities, which means being cooperative in the far seas on non-traditional security issues to adhere to international norms, yet remaining assertive and unyielding in near-sea territorial disputes to safeguard national core interests.

In conclusion, the book highlights areas where the PRC has been cooperative, such as escort missions in the Gulf of Aden and information sharing on fisheries. Chan challenges the idea that China became a maritime threat overnight, instead characterising its rise as a long historical process moulded by specific sea incidents and shifts in national priorities, such as placing territorial integrity at the top, followed by economic development and then cooperation.

BRUNO PIERRI



C. Eisen invenit. *De la Fosse sculpsit.*

CONSIDÉRATIONS SUR LES CAUSES DE LA GRANDEUR DES ROMAINS, ET DE LEUR DÉCADENCE.

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NAM - Strategic History issue 1
November 2026

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