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Asian Nations from Wealth to Power
Projection**

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THE EVOLUTION OF MILITARY CAPABILITIES OF ASIAN NATIONS FROM WEALTH TO POWER PROJECTION

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, the author theorises that a state's growth in economic might is often matched by an increasingly outward-facing strategic vision and a corresponding build-up of military power projection capabilities. He cited the example of the United States, a growing economic power by the late 19th century, who managed to overcome its isolationist foreign policy and rise to its global role. The author then explores the relationship between wealth and power, highlighting that as nations become increasingly wealthy, they extend themselves globally as well as equip themselves with military tools to influence areas far beyond their borders. The author proceeds with a definition of military power projection. He then analyses the examples of China, India and Japan and shows how the acquisition of such capabilities by each country is inextricably linked to their rising economic strength and increasingly global strategic vision.

Keywords: Power Projection; Economy; Influence; Aircraft Carriers; Balance of Power

INTRODUCTION

In this essay, the author theorises that a state's growth in economic might is often matched by an increasingly outward-facing strategic vision and a corresponding build-up of military power projection capabilities. Examining how the United States (US), a burgeoning economic power by the late 19th century, overcame its isolationist foreign policy and rose to its global role, Zakaria asks: 'What turns rich nations into great powers? Why, as states grow increasingly wealthy, do they build large armies, entangle themselves in politics beyond their borders, and seek international influence.'¹

The relationship between wealth and power can perhaps reveal why—in the face of modern technologies that purportedly render aircraft carriers hulking targets—the number of indigenously constructed aircraft carriers by Asian powers has been steadily increasing. After defining the term military power projection, the author will analyse the examples of China, India and Japan, and show how the acquisition of such capabilities by each country is inextricably linked to their rising economic strength and increasingly global strategic vision.

DEFINITIONS: THE WHAT, WHY AND HOW OF MILITARY POWER PROJECTION

What is military power projection? While there is no universal definition, probably owing to the range of capabilities possessed and various political objectives pursued by different countries, the following definition will be used: 'The projection of military power over

extended lines of communication into a distant operational area to accomplish a specific objective.'²

This definition is appropriate as it highlights three key aspects of military power projection. First, the term 'military power' is taken to connote conventional military capabilities. While non-conventional means of projecting power exist, such as cyber or information warfare, this essay is primarily focused on the tangible and perceptible aspects of military power. Second, the terms 'extended lines of communication' and 'distant operational area' imply an area of operations far beyond home borders. This distinction separates a country using its army against its next-door neighbours (e.g. India vis Pakistan), from one using its power projection capability to influence its rimlands (e.g. China vis the Arabian Gulf).

Third, this definition clarifies the 'why' of military power projection. The term 'to accomplish a specific objective' suggests a military operation of a limited scope, as opposed to full-scale invasion. Although power projection capabilities are fundamentally kinetic in nature, they in fact provide utility to policy makers across the range from peace to hostilities. As Ladwig suggests, these applications range from 'soft' military options (e.g. securing seas lanes of communication, non-combatant evacuation operations, humanitarian relief, peacekeeping), to 'hard' military options (e.g. showing the flag, compellence and deterrence, punishment, armed intervention and conquest).³



Indian Navy flotilla including aircraft carrier INS Viraat escorting INS Vikramaditya on its way home.

Finally, ‘how’ is military power projection achieved? While all branches of an Armed Force will accentuate their contribution to military power projection, this essay will focus primarily on naval capabilities.⁴ Keeping Corbett’s famous dictum firmly in view that the real point of sea power is ultimately about affecting what is on land, any military’s ability to sustain and project power in far-flung realms lies primarily via the maritime domain. Naval ships such as aircraft carriers, guided missile cruisers and amphibious landing ships, as well as their associated aircraft and logistics vessels, enable both the means for sea control and the means of projecting power from it.⁵ Collectively, a navy with such vessels, that is able to conduct power projection missions in regions beyond at least its own exclusive economic zones, is also known as a blue-water navy.⁶ As Shambaugh observes in his analysis of the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), ‘Without a blue-water capability, forces cannot be dispatched out-of-area—much less resupplied and sustained—in any significant numbers.’⁷

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CASE STUDIES: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WEALTH AND POWER PROJECTION

As described in the introduction, the author proposes that there is an observable relationship between a state’s rising economic clout, its desire for increasing global influence, and its acquisition of military power projection capabilities. China, India and Japan were chosen as case studies given their status as the three largest economies in Asia, and as each country has indigenous aircraft carrier programmes underway. Broadly, each case study will be broken down into an analysis of the economy, the espoused national and naval strategy, and the power projection capabilities being developed.

Case Study: China

China’s rise to economic superpower status since the liberalization of her economy is not in dispute. In absolute terms, China is the second largest economy in the world, and in the last decade has more than doubled her share of the total world economy from 7% to 15%.⁸ As Allison describes, ‘never before in history has a nation risen so far, so fast, on so many dimensions of power.’⁹

As China’s economy has grown, so has her reliance on Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs) for uninterrupted access to raw materials, especially energy resources. Since 1995 she has become a net importer of energy, especially oil and gas from the Middle East.¹⁰ In 2003, President Hu Jintao highlighted Beijing’s concern for the vulnerability of her SLOCs when he described the ‘Malacca Dilemma’, the scenario where adversarial forces interdicted Chinese shipping at key maritime chokepoints.¹¹

Further evidence of China's interconnectivity with the global system, and her increasing desire for influence in her peripheries, can be found in the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) concept. Ostensibly, the MSR seeks to promote an image of economic collaboration, harkening back to the golden age of trade in the Asia-Pacific region to soothe criticisms against perceived Chinese maritime expansionism.¹² Nevertheless, regional suspicions of expansionism have been difficult to counter when compared alongside more 'concrete' developments, such as the erection of artificial island forts in the South China Sea, as well as the expansion of her 'string of pearls' in the Indian Ocean—overseas bases in Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Djibouti—to support her deployments.¹³

Similarly, the espoused role of the PLAN has been expanding to support China's growing overseas interests. Scholars have observed how Chinese naval strategy has evolved from 'near-coast' defense in the early 1980s, to 'near-seas' defence after the mid-1980s, and then to 'far-seas' operations by the 1990's.¹⁴ More recently, Mahan's strategic logic about the importance of sea power has been gaining popularity, with heavy emphasis on the development of a blue-water navy to complement Chinese maritime ambitions—the 2013 Defence White Paper outlined a 'strategy to exploit, utilise and protect the seas and oceans, and build China into a maritime power.'¹⁵

It is thus in this context—the realisation of China's maritime ambitions—that China's rapid build-up of aircraft carrier capability should be seen. As Shambaugh noted back in 1996, 'What is really needed

to achieve a regional power projection capability are one or two aircraft carriers.'¹⁶ In 2012, the PLAN commissioned her first aircraft carrier, the 40,000-ton Type 001 *Liaoning*. Although the gestation period with the *Liaoning* was relatively long, and her Cold-War era origins are likely to limit her primarily to training and show-of-flag missions, the project experience has consequently allowed China to ramp up her plans for larger and more sophisticated carriers. China commissioned the indigenously constructed 55,000-ton Type 002 *Shandong* in 2019, has the 85,000-ton as-yet-unnamed Type 003 expected to enter service by 2023, and has begun construction of the nuclear-powered Type 004 already underway.¹⁷ Alongside its aircraft carriers, it is important to note that China is also building up the rest of its ocean-going fleet, with new guided missile destroyers amphibious landing ships and logistic ships collectively enhancing her power projection capabilities.¹⁸

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PLAN Aircraft Carrier *Liaoning* in Hong Kong Waters.

For what ends will China deploy these new power projection capabilities? Perhaps China's intentions are best summarised by Admiral Liu Huaqing, widely recognised as the 'father' of China's aircraft carrier's programme. Writing in 1997, he noticeably argued for both 'soft' and 'hard' military applications: 'Aircraft carriers were needed to protect China's sovereignty and maritime resources, especially with regard to Taiwan and the South China Sea; guard China's SLOC as the country industrialised and increasingly became a major trading power; enable China to keep up with regional powers such as India and Japan, and give PLAN a decisive edge in future naval warfare.'¹⁹

Case Study: India

While India's economic rise has not been as precipitous as China's, it has not been any less impressive. In absolute terms, India has the fifth largest economy in the world, and similar to China, she doubled her share of the world economy in the past decade, from 1.5% to 3%.²⁰ Significantly, India has also overtaken China to become the fastest growing major economy in the world.²¹

The vibrancy of India's economy is heavily tied to the sea. 90% of India's external trade by volume and 77% by value is seaborne.²² Similar to China, India is also a net importer of energy, the vast majority of which comes from the Persian Gulf. Moreover, trade within India's 'extended neighbourhood', an arc stretching from the Suez Canal to the South China Sea, has increased faster than trade within her immediate neighbourhood of South Asia.²³

India has also gradually begun to adopt a more externally-oriented strategic vision, in contrast to the continental mindset adopted during India's post-independence period. Since the end of the Cold War, the liberalisation of its economy has brought a greater focus on India's central position within the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), and the significance of the IOR as an arena featuring global SLOCs for both trade and oil.²⁴ Highlighting the necessity of a conducive external environment to support India's internal development goals, Shivshankar Menon, then India's national security advisor, said that 'Unless India has a peaceful and prosperous neighbourhood, it will not be able to perform its own primary task of socio-economic development.'²⁵

Reflecting this concern has been an evolution in naval strategy to look increasingly 'outwards'. India's first naval plan following independence was primarily focused on the continent—ensuring supplies reached and left India by sea, keeping her ports open, preventing enemy landings and supporting the Army in national policy.²⁶ In contrast, India's latest Maritime Doctrine suggests a much more expansive focus, including as 'primary areas of maritime interests' the littorals in the Persian Gulf all the way to the South China Sea, and includes as 'secondary areas of interest' areas as far as the Mediterranean, East China Sea and any 'other areas of national interest based on considerations of Indian diaspora, overseas investments and political relations.'²⁷

Central to these blue-water ambitions will be the Indian Navy's (IN) new aircraft carriers. Although India has in a sense maintained a limited power-projection capability when she acquired two World War Two(WWII)-era aircraft carriers from the British in the 1960s, there has always been doubts on their credibility, especially in regards to maintenance and sustainability.²⁸

Modernisation of the IN's carrier fleet is gaining steam. In 2013, she commissioned the 45,000-ton *Vikramaditya*, which India purchased from the Russians in 2004. At the same time, final construction and delivery is ongoing for the 40,000-ton *Vikrant*, the first carrier to be built indigenously. These carriers will operate the MiG-29K fighters, themselves replacements for India's ageing Sea Harriers. At the same time, her carriers will also be supported by a renewed surface fleet that included destroyers, submarines and fleet tankers.²⁹

These new power projection capabilities will undoubtedly grant India's policy makers flexible capabilities to better address a range of concerns beyond her borders, such as the regional balance of power vis China, to issues such as transnational terrorism, SLOC security and the security of her overseas diaspora.³⁰ As Joshi observes, 'Like virtually all rising powers in history, the parallel growth of India's economy, interests and strategic vision has,

collectively, given New Delhi both the resource base and incentives to be tempted to influence events increasingly far from its immediate periphery.³¹

Case Study: Japan

This brings us to the third case study of Japan. While China and India seem to present ready-made cases for the relationship between rising wealth and the development of maritime power projection capabilities, Japan ostensibly seems to buck the trend on the first point. Although Japan has continuously occupied the position of the world's second or third largest economy since 1970, even at the height of her economic power in the 1980's she did not seek to acquire military power projection capabilities as theorized.³² Why then has Japan recently started to develop her first aircraft carriers since WWII?

Broadly, the shackles that have held back Japan's development of military power projection capabilities have steadily been eroded. Following WWII, Japan practiced the Yoshida doctrine, relying on the favorable international environment and recourse to the US-Japan alliance to prioritise her economy over her defence.³³ However, since the beginning of the new millennium, sandwiched between acknowledgment of the relative decline of United States hegemony and acceptance of the rise of China to great power status, Japan has begun to adopt a posture of 'reluctant realism'—a recognition of the need to strengthen her military capabilities.³⁴ A strengthened military would increase her military contribution to the US-Japan

alliance, and it would also act as a fallback to defend her own interests if needed. This realism has been precipitated by events such as the Senkaku-Diaoyu island disputes, where Japan perceived the limitations of US involvement against China's rising military presence.³⁵ In this context, Japan's post-war adherence to pacifism has also been questioned, best encapsulated by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's attempts to revise the post-War constitution which limits Japan's right to have a fully functional defence force with offensive capabilities.³⁶

This has resulted in a shift in Japan's security strategy. The National Defence Programme Outline released in 2004 highlighted the need to shift from a force structured principally around the territorial defence of Japan, to the development of power projection capabilities, justified by the need to participate in United Nations (UN) or US-led multinational coalitions.³⁷ The centerpiece of this shift in thinking has undoubtedly been the two 13,500-ton *Hyuga*-class destroyers and two 19,500-ton *Izumo*-class destroyers constructed and commissioned between 2008 to 2017. While officially designated as helicopter-destroyers (DDHs), they are essentially helicopter carriers in all aspects but name. Moreover, in December 2018, the Japanese Cabinet approved the conversion of the two larger *Izumo*-class vessels to launch and recover fixed-wing aircraft.³⁸ Although smaller than the Chinese and Indian flagships, when combined with Japan's concurrent acquisition of fifth-



JS *Izumo* (DDH-183) with new markings and heat resistance coating on the flight deck, 3rd October 2021.

generation F-35B stealth fighters, this will provide Japan a substantial high-end power projection capability, that will allow a complementary point of integration with the US military if required. As President Trump remarked during his visit to the second *Izumo*-class carrier in December 2019: 'with this extraordinary new equipment [F-35Bs], the *JS Kaga* will help our nations defend against a range of complex threats in the region and far beyond.'³⁹

Japan's new power projection capabilities, beyond their evident high-end warfighting potential, will allow her to secure constant access to vital sea routes, a critical strategic imperative for an island nation reliant on trade, with few natural resources and limited domestic food production. As the 'Great Britain of the Far East', such assets would also allow her to foster maritime co-operation with like-minded partners, such as India and Australia.⁴⁰

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Overall, although there has been some delay between her economic rise and subsequent pursuit of power projection capabilities, it could be argued that the geo-strategic considerations have finally come home to roost. Funded by Japan's mature but still significant economy, Waltz's prediction, that uncomfortable dependencies and perceived vulnerabilities would lead Japan to develop greater military capabilities, appears to be coming true.⁴¹

SUMMARY OF CASE STUDIES

The relationship between wealth and power is a well-trodden path. As Kennedy argues: 'there is a very clear connection in the long run between an individual great power's economic rise and fall and its growth and decline as an important military power or

world empire.'⁴² And as Levy has defined, one of the key distinguishing features of a great power is not only possessing relative self-sufficiency with respect to defence, but the ability to project military power beyond its borders in pursuit of its interests.⁴³

The cases of China, India and Japan have all shown that with increasing wealth comes an increasingly expansive strategic vision, and the acquisition of military power projection capabilities to support it. The general pattern observed is as follows:

1. As countries become wealthier, their economies become further inter-connected to the global system. One key aspect is reliance on SLOCs for trade and energy.

2. This results in a shift of grand strategy beyond fundamental priorities, such as territorial defence, to the desire for influence in her peripheral regions. Often, this is articulated as some form of maritime strategy.

3. To match this increasingly expansive strategic vision, these countries acquire military power projection capabilities, particularly in the form of aircraft carriers, as the flagships of increasingly blue-water capable navies.

CONCLUSION

'But who shall tell us now what sort of navy to build? We shall take leave to be strong upon the seas, in the future as in the past; and there will be no thought of offense or of provocation in that. Our ships are our natural bulwarks.'⁴⁴

President Woodrow Wilson
State of the Union Address
8th December, 1914.

Despite it being only four months after declaring American impartiality as to the Great War that was beginning to rage across Europe, it is perhaps not surprising to discover how President Woodrow Wilson chose to close his State of the Union address with meditations on the necessity of a strong navy to defend US interests. As a global economic heavyweight, it was gradual but inevitable that the US would eventually embrace its position as the newest great power on the world scene.⁴⁵

Based on the cases analysed, it appears that the Asian powers of China, India and Japan are also undergoing similar transformations to become great powers. Buoyed by the relative strength of their economies, they have pronounced ambitious maritime strategies and are equipping themselves with military tools to influence areas far beyond their borders. Will conflict and war thus break out as these powers flex

their newly acquired military might? Or will these rising great powers show great responsibility in deploying their power projection capabilities to secure the global commons, thereby managing to avoid the Thucydides trap?⁴⁶ As we enter a new carrier age in the Asia-Pacific, it remains to be seen what type of change will be ushered in.

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