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Militarisation in East Asia

Considerations from the Works of Thucydides
and Alfred Thayer Mahan



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Micallef, Steve: Militarisation in East Asia. Considerations from the Works of Thucydides and Alfred Thayer Mahan, Hamburg, Anchor Academic Publishing 2017

PDF-eBook-ISBN: 978-3-96067-621-8

Druck/Herstellung: Anchor Academic Publishing, Hamburg, 2017

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek:

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Bibliographical Information of the German National Library:

The German National Library lists this publication in the German National Bibliography. Detailed bibliographic data can be found at: <http://dnb.d-nb.de>

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Hermannstal 119k, 22119 Hamburg
<http://www.diplomica-verlag.de>, Hamburg 2017
Printed in Germany

Abstract

“I believe China seeks hegemony in East Asia. Simple as that.” Such were the words Admiral Harry Harris Commander U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) used to describe Chinese actions in East Asia. After two decades of effort towards modernisation, it seems that the PLAN is in a position to challenge US primacy in East Asia. The PLAN has developed both in terms of capability and strategy through its emphasis on Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) and blue-water forces, embracing Alfred Thayer Mahan’s ideas on access and sea control. What we are witnessing in China is a shift in thinking: from a continental viewpoint to a maritime one.

After a decade of wars in the Middle East, the US has been taken by surprise. Today it looks at China’s naval build-up as threatening. The US has taken steps to refocus its attention on East Asia and meet the challenge of a contested sea. The dynamics of the Sino-American relation will also be examined through the lens of Thucydides and his ideas of great power.

This study discusses Mahan’s and Thucydides’ influence on Chinese and American ways of thinking and whether it will impact the future trajectory of the relationship. The main developments in capability and strategy on both sides will also be examined.

What remains certain is that the region is primed for great power competition.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Mr. James H. Wyllie, for his instrumental assistance. His continuous guidance and support were vital for me to develop my research and eventually finish this study. His help has been invaluable and greatly appreciated.

A very special thank you goes to my family, most notably my parents. I owe them an immense amount of gratitude for their loyalty, support and optimism throughout the years. This study is dedicated to them, in the hope that I managed to make them proud.

Steve Micallef

August 2016

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