

# The Road to Atlantic: China's naval projection

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*By Tom Mantelet*

## Introduction

In the past decades, China has profoundly invested in the modernization of China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) moving China to the first position as the world's largest maritime force with its size expected to grow in the future (U.S. Department of Defense 2021). Whereas China's initial goal is to strengthen its Navy to match or surpass the United States global influence or power in the Indo-Pacific region, it is also to project its forces to protect China's national interests abroad and gain a more important place in the international system. In doing so, China is using a combination of economic, political, and military tools, under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), to evade the United States' containment strategy and secure its strategic position.

First presented by President Xi Jinping in 2013, China's Belt and Road ambition to construct and develop a far-reaching network of shipping lanes and railroads in Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Europe aimed to reconfigure the architecture of nowadays commercial interactions. Nonetheless, under such extensive interconnectivity, China is also transforming geopolitical dynamics in certain strategic areas of the world. By massively investing in foreign infrastructures and industry, China has also integrated the military and security aspects to ensure stability and protect its trade routes. This power projection represents a tremendous change in Chinese foreign policy when China has always avoided to permanently deploy its military abroad. For example, with a \$1 trillion BRI investment among the 46 partner African countries, China aims to create and lead a pan-African security architecture that will extend from the Indian to the Atlantic Ocean (Tanchum 2021). Therefore, it could imply the presence of PLAN in the South Atlantic Ocean in the following years.

Furthermore, on July 2022, French Admiral Pierre Vandier argued in front of the Parliament about the danger of Chinese ambitions at sea. He warned about the massive re-armament of the PLAN, "unprecedented since the Second World War". As previously mentioned, China is massively investing in its Navy and, according to Vandier, will have a tonnage 2.5 greater than the U.S navy by 2030. The French Admiral also expressed his concerns and those of Norway regarding the potential arrival of the PLAN in the North Atlantic, with the help of the Russian (Aldebert 2022).

From this perspective, China's rapid evolution at sea and economic influence starts to reach areas that ought to be unchallenged under the Western-led international order. The possibility of a Chinese military presence in both the South and North Atlantic could shift the balance and confronts Europe and the United States to take rapid actions to contain it.

## Equatorial Guinea and the Port of Bata

Equatorial Guinea has proven to be a perfect candidate for Chinese ambitions in the Atlantic and pan-African security architecture. Amidst declining diplomatic relations with the West, Equatorial Guinea has found in China a sound economic and security partner. In 2006, Equatorial Guinea's government and the China Exim bank signed a \$2 billion facility development agreement for the port of Bata's modernization, inaugurating it in 2019. As part of the modernization, the port's expansion and the construction of a deep-sea port facility.

Such a plan echoes three years of Chinese investments and military assistance provision in Djibouti that ended up with the establishment of China's first overseas military base at the strategic entrance to the Red sea corridor (Tanchum 2021). China will likely apply the same strategy in Equatorial Guinea where the development of large-scale trade infrastructures embodied in the BRI is intertwined with Chinese hard power. Since 2014, the PLAN has been involved in many anti-piracy operations and drills with African countries in the Gulf of Guinea. Furthermore, Equatorial Guinea conducted two senior-level meetings with China's defence minister to discuss military engagement (Lin, Blanchette, Bermudez & Dizolele 2021).

Thus, the port of Bata represents an ideal candidate for China's military projection and pan-African security. With its new deep-water commercial port on the Gulf of Guinea, Bata is well connected to the rest of Central Africa with highways that link it to Gabon. Additionally, the port infrastructure is situated near an oil facility, intermodal yard and a large warehouse area which makes it effective for re-supply (TME 2022).

From this perspective, China would have the tools and the means to project a naval fleet in the South Atlantic with the ability to resupply in the Gulf of Guinea. Furthermore, the Port of Bata could be the first of many Chinese Western African oversea bases.



*Port of Bata, Equatorial Guinea*

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## **The United States response**

The growing presence and investment from China have created concerns in Biden's administration. The United States sent Jon Finer, the deputy national security adviser to Equatorial Guinea to assess the situation and eventually refrain from China's ambitions in the area.

General Stephen Townsend, commander of the United States Africa Command, testified in the Senate on April 2, arguing that a Chinese military naval facility on the Atlantic coast of Africa would be "the most significant threat" to the West (Phillips 2021).

As a response, the United States has tried to strengthen its security relation with Equatorial Guinea. The United States and Equatorial Guinea are sharing deep economic ties, especially in the energy sector. Equatorial Guinea indeed relies on American oil companies to extract offshore resources that represent an extremely valuable asset for the African sub-Saharan country. Whereas Equatorial Guinea is also facing a growing threat from illegal fishing and piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, the United States are willing to increase cooperation on maritime security in the Gulf (Phillips 2021). In March 2021, Equatorial Guinea participated in United States-led naval drills. Furthermore, five months later, a U.S Navy ship moored in the port of Bata.

Through this cooperation, the United States is not asking Equatorial Guinea to disregard China as a partner but to consider the strategic threat this partnership could represent for the United States.

## **A New Door to North Atlantic and Western interoperability**

As previously mentioned, France has recently warned about the potential presence of the PLAN in the North Atlantic in the following years. The construction of a fleet of icebreakers combined with the current Sino-Russian relations and the Western position on Taiwan would make such a power projection from China highly possible. With the help of Russia to resupply and guarantee a passage, China could project a fleet that would reach the North Atlantic and destabilize European and American strategic positions.

Mixed with the current Russia-Ukraine war, Europe is facing the urgent need to bolster its interoperability. As Putin is meeting with Chinese president Xi Jinping this September to discuss Ukraine and Taiwan, it shows the willingness to tighten relations to face a Western coalition (Soldatkin 2022). It could be a concern of territorial integrity and sovereignty if China decided to align with Russia against the West with China's ambition in the Atlantic. To counter and prepare for this possibility, the French Navy Chief of Staff emphasized the need for better training for greater and more complex military drills, integrated with increased cooperation with allies (Aldebert 2022).

For example, such drills have been planned for the end of November 2021, such as the military exercise Polaris 21. Led by France, the exercise regrouped 6 countries: France, UK, U.S, Spain, Greece, and Italy (Ministère des Armées 2021). Whereas Polaris 21 aimed to prepare France in high-intensity warfare at sea, it was also a way to train European countries and NATO members to jointly conduct large-scale military operations. The drills also involved a multi-component force emphasizing the use of sea, air and land power.



In the prevision of future threats coming from the East, Europe and NATO members must better prepare and train to project a capable force, highly inter-operable both in the Atlantic and Mediterranean Sea.

Furthermore, the adhesion of Finland and Sweden to NATO would reinforce NATO and European position against a Chinese threat due to their proximity to the Baltic and Barents Sea.

### **NATO's Strategic Concept and China**

China's power projections were also on the agenda during NATO Heads of State and Government's meeting in Madrid on 29 June 2022 where they approved a new Strategic Concept for the North Atlantic alliance. NATO acknowledges China's ambition to control key "technological and industrial sectors, critical infrastructure, and strategic materials and supply chains" (NATO 2022). As such China creates strategic dependencies and increases its influence through its economic clout. Therefore, its influence aims to destabilize the international order both "in the space, cyber and maritime domains" (NATO 2022).

Consequently, NATO's new Strategic Concept embodies China [fl1] as a systemic challenge to the Euro-Atlantic stability and aims to enhance NATO's awareness, resilience, and preparedness against China's power projection. As the challenges are principally oriented toward the maritime domain, the North Atlantic alliance is looking to increase naval interoperability in the context of high-intensity conflict and strengthen its posture in the Atlantic, Baltic and Mediterranean seas.

[fl1]In the recent NATO Strategic Concept, China is not considered as a threat to the Alliance but more as a strategic challenge considering the continuous erosion of the rule-based international order through PRC's assertiveness in various domains (cyber, economic, technology, nuclear, etc)

To do so, NATO and the European Union aim to reinforce their partnerships in addressing the Euro-Atlantic emerging challenges posed by the People's Republic of China (PRC). It promotes more defence investment from non-EU NATO members and a "stronger and more capable European defence" to would be highly interoperable with NATO forces (NATO 2022).

## **Conclusion**

China aims to export its hard power to defend its interests abroad but also to challenge the international order. To counter China's naval expansion, the West needs not only to increase its military interoperability through NATO, European Union member states and its allies but also to cooperate at the economic level. China is using its soft power, mainly through its economic weight under the BRI, to secure access to geo-strategic areas.

It is important to acknowledge the undisputable position China has nowadays in the international system. Furthermore, the overreaching influence of China in Africa could accentuate the separation between the West and the continent.

Whereas China remained mostly quiet compared to the United States in many international crises, it has now the tools, if uncontested, to impose its decisions. When looking at a potential military conflict in the Atlantic, it is less likely to happen as the main war theatre would be in South-East Asia. On the other hand, the recent rapprochement between China and Russia could be decisive in how China is willing to act toward the West.

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