*Indo-Pacific Security Program*
# Memorandum

# THE NINE GATES OF POWER:
## China's Passageways to the World Ocean

**By Kyle Kinnie**

In December 2010, the *Asahi Shimbun* published a remarkable roadmap laying out the future trajectory of Chinese maritime expansion.[1] In its analysis, the *Shimbun* outlined a geographically contingent thesis of Chinese geopolitical strategy—one on which the scholar Tetsuo Kotani elaborated further in a 2019 academic paper.[2] Both publications argue that Chinese maritime access to the Pacific and Indian Oceans is effectively constrained through a series of islands and straits in the First Island Chain.[3] These potential chokepoints constitute the "Nine Gates" through which Chinese maritime commerce and sea power must flow.

The first maritime passage flows from the Yellow Sea through the Korea Strait past Tsushima Island and empties into the Sea of Japan. The second flows through the La Pérouse Strait, which separates southern Sakhalin from northern Hokkaido and flows into the Sea of Okhotsk and from there to the North Pacific via the Kuril Islands, of which the 58 km (31 nautical mile) Bussol Strait is the widest passage. The third pierces the 1,100 km (594 nautical mile) Ryukyu arc at the Miyako Strait, a 250 km (135 nautical mile) gap between Miyako Island and Okinawa that includes international waters. The fourth pierces the southwestern-most islands of the arc, especially at the Yonaguni Gap, which completes the remaining distance of 108 km (58 nautical miles) to Taiwan. These two gates control free passage from the East China Sea to the Pacific.

The fifth gate is the Taiwan Strait itself, which tapers in width from Taiwan's geographical coccyx at Cape Eluanbi around 408 km (220 nautical miles) to 130 km (70 nautical miles) northwest of Taoyuan, Hsinchu, and Miaoli Counties. The sixth is the Luzon Strait, which separates southern Taiwan from northern Luzon by 250 km (135 nautical miles) and links the South China Sea to the Philippine Sea and the wider Pacific.

The seventh is the Strait of Malacca, which divides Sumatra from the Malay Peninsula and remains one of the most systemically vital shipping lanes in the

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world. The eighth is the Sunda Strait, whose narrowness (minimum width 24 km/13 nautical miles) between Java and Sumatra and shallow average depth (20 m/66 feet) render it less attractive to modern oceangoing vessels than in earlier eras of merchant trade. The ninth is the Lombok Strait, which separates Bali from Lombok. Although only 20 km (11 nautical miles) wide at its narrows, its minimum depth of 250 m (820 ft) is sufficient both to accommodate bulk carriers too massive to safely transit the Strait of Malacca and to constitute the Wallace Line, one of the most distinctive biogeographical boundaries on Earth. The last three gates effectively control Chinese access to the Indian Ocean.

The Nine Gates framework serves as a useful tool for understanding the trajectories and limitations of Chinese maritime power. The recent military history of the Western Pacific can be seen fundamentally as a contest over access and denial of the Nine Gates. Past and future escalations across the Taiwan Strait, meanwhile, are understood as a means of ameliorating Chinese maritime geographic vulnerabilities and ensuring Chinese access to at least three gates beyond the reach of foreign coercion.

Finally, there are geographic vulnerabilities embedded in the positioning of the Nine Gates that will affect the balance of power in the Western Pacific. Because geography does not change on a human timescale, it acts as a durable and constant constraint on power projection. In short, controlling the Nine Gates will determine mastery over the Western Pacific.

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**The Historical Importance of the Nine Gates**

The Nine Gates are of paramount strategic interest because they geographically check the eastward and southward expansionist potential of the major Eurasian land powers, Russia and China. Through these funnels, the fleet assets of those nations can be defeated in detail.

Ever since Toyotomi Hideyoshi's unsuccessful 1592–1598 invasions of Korea, many of the naval and amphibious clashes that have taken place in East Asia have involved efforts to control the Nine Gates. Control over the lucrative oceanic trade routes passing through the Taiwan Strait lay at the root of the Sino–Dutch wars on Formosa during the 17th century. Japan's Meiji-era territorial expansion to the north (Hokkaido 1869–1904; South Sakhalin 1905), west (Korea 1910), and south (Ryukyus 1879; Formosa 1895) gave Tokyo control over at least four of the Nine Gates. George Dewey's lopsided naval victory at Manila in 1898 turned the Luzon Strait into a corridor of U.S. power projection toward the Asian mainland. Russian attempts to contest the gate leading through the Korea Strait cost it both the Pacific and Baltic Fleets at the Yellow Sea (1904) and Tsushima (1905).

In addition to reasons of resource acquisition, imperial prestige, and threat neutralization, Japanese wartime strategy during the first six months of the Pacific Theater can be understood as a race toward complete littoral area denial. The occupation of the Philippines, the seizure of Hong Kong, the lightning campaign down the Malayan Peninsula through to Singapore, and the Battles of the Java Sea and Sunda Strait consolidated all Nine Gates under Japanese control. The root of many of the strategic disagreements between Douglas MacArthur, Chester Nimitz, and Ernest J. King in 1943–1944 was over how to best attack the Nine Gates. King's strenuous opposition to the directionality of MacArthur's island-hopping strategy was overruled by fall 1944, and Operation Causeway, his planned amphibious invasion of Japanese Formosa, never took place. Assuming no Allied amphibious invasions of Kyushu and Honshu, Causeway would have easily ranked as the "largest sea-air-land engagement in world history."[4]

China's historic difficulty at controlling the Nine Gates

made it vulnerable to opportunistic raids along its east coast from pirates originating in Japan and the Ryukyus during the 13th-17th centuries. This structural vulnerability to offshore power projection into the heart of the Chinese empire-state arguably exacerbated its "century of humiliation." Western and Japanese warships could threaten, or seize outright, critical port infrastructure at Shanghai, Tianjin, Nanjing, Dalian, Port Arthur, Hong Kong, Qingdao, and Guangzhou nearly at will because of their uncontested command of the Nine Gates.

Russia's eastward expansion likewise cost Qing China northern oceanic access via the navigable Amur River and approximately 3,200 km (1,988 miles) of Pacific coastline under the unequal treaties of Aigun (1858) and Peking (1860).[5] More damningly for future Chinese commerce and naval power projection, the cession of Outer Manchuria to the Russian Empire included what are today the warm-water/deepwater ports of Vladivostok and Vostochny. Despite certain infrastructural inadequacies for managing container traffic, both ports routinely process large quantities of bulk and containerized cargo, and the former was the primary anchorage of the Russian Pacific Fleet from tsarist times to the early 2010s.[6]

**China's Nine Gates Dilemma**

Ever since Hu Jintao observed in 2003 that "certain powers have all along encroached on and tried to control navigation through the Strait [of Malacca]," China has been said to face a "Malacca dilemma" (马六甲困局).[7] At its root lies Beijing's acknowledgement of the structural vulnerability of the sea lines of communication, maritime trade routes, and energy and commodity inputs that underpin its export-led growth model to both natural and imposed bottlenecks.[8] While Malacca receives considerable attention as a conduit for 2/3rds of China's maritime trade volume and 4/5ths of its oil imports,[9] the baseline thesis can also be extended to China's other gates to the World Ocean. To say that China has a Malacca dilemma significantly understates the case. In truth, China has a Nine Gates dilemma.

Since the XIX Party Congress in 2017, China's *Xin xing* ("new model") foreign policy has marked a watershed in how China approaches its relations with the outside world. China characterizes itself as a "new major country" practicing a "new international relations" with a "new neighborhood policy" for a "new regional order" in Asia. In addition, China touts a "new outlook of global governance" with the Chinese provision of "new public goods," both regionally and globally.[10] *Xin xing* has gradually supplanted the outwardly less assertive Deng-era model of *Tao guang yang hui* ("to hide one's light and nourish oneself out of sight").[11] With the launch of Xi Jinping's flagship Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2013, *Xin xing* promises to bring a longstanding goal of Chinese foreign policy—the creation of a "community with a shared future for mankind"—closer to reality.[12]

Chinese maritime commerce and power projection are funneled through nine geographic thresholds. Without maritime access unencumbered by the credible possibility of foreign coercion, China's economic status and planetary power projection operate, at least to a degree, at Washington's sufferance. Without uncontestable access through the Nine Gates, Beijing can only fulfill Xi's 2014 vision of becoming a "major polar power"[13] with difficulty. Its 2018 policy directive aiming at "Near-Arctic State" status is likewise hard to envision.[14] Beijing also risks the long-term viability of the BRI's northernmost spur as a result of a warming Arctic. Nor do three of the six overland BRI economic corridors (China-Mongolia-Russia; the New Eurasian Land Bridge; and China-Central Asia-West Asia)[15] appear likely to displace cheaper and more efficient bulk oceangoing routes, thereby leaving the Malacca dilemma unresolved.

**Chinese Countermeasures**

In response, Chinese strategists have increasingly called for an "active defense" across wider geospatial domains. The PLA's 2014 strategic guidelines for "winning informatized local wars" call for the development of long-range precision standoff weaponry and unmanned systems for

conducting "integrated joint operations."[16] While China's 2015 defense white paper does not explicitly mention the Nine Gates, its elevation of the institutional role of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) within the "active defense" paradigm and strong emphasis on the need to make "preparations for maritime military struggle" are indicative of Beijing's desire to reduce its oceanic vulnerabilities. The paper anticipates that the PLAN "will gradually shift its focus from 'offshore waters defense' to the combination of 'offshore waters defense' with 'open seas protection,'[17] and build a combined, multi-functional and efficient marine combat force structure."[18] Its authors contend that "The traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned, and great importance has to be attached to managing the seas and oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests." To do so, the PLA must "develop a modern maritime military force structure commensurate with its national security and development interests… protect the security of strategic SLOCs and overseas interests, and participate in international maritime cooperation, so as to provide strategic support for building itself into a maritime power."[19]

The realization of these objectives includes the buildup and enhancement of both offensive and defensive capabilities. Chinese nuclear and conventional offensive capabilities have undergone consistent upward growth during the Xi era. For instance, the Second Artillery Corps of the PLA was redesignated the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF) and elevated to coequal branch status with the Army, Navy, and Air Force in 2016. Subsequently, the 2019 defense white paper highlighted the "critical role" of the PLARF in "maintaining China's national sovereignty and security" by "deterring wars in all battlespaces" through "strengthening intermediate and long-range precision strike forces, and enhancing strategic counter-balance capability." In terms of nonnuclear capabilities, the PLARF fields the largest ground-based missile force on the planet, "with over 2,200 conventionally armed ballistic and cruise missiles and with enough antiship missiles to attack every U.S. surface combatant vessel in the South China Sea with enough firepower to overcome each ship's missile defense."[20]

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On the seas, the PLAN has made significant progress toward meeting asset- and capability-growth targets laid out in the early 1980s. Former PRC Central Military Commission Vice-Chairman Liu Huaqing's three-phase plan of naval expansion called for PLAN domination of the littoral seas within the First Island Chain by 2000 and the oceanic arc within the Second Island Chain by 2020. While these targets are still not fully met, Liu's third benchmark of possessing a true blue water navy with aircraft carriers and planetary expeditionary force projection by 2050 appears feasible, if not probable.[21] PLAN surface action and amphibious task groups routinely conduct freedom of navigation operations (FONOPS) through contested waters in the South China Sea, Taiwan Strait, and increasingly through the Miyako Strait and Yonaguni Gap.[22] Although China's neighbors view these FONOPS as a source of provocation, Beijing regards military-vessel transit rights as ratifications of preexisting sovereignty over disputed territories like the Diaoyu (Senkaku) Islands, which its national defense strategy already views as "inalienable parts of the Chinese territory."[23]

The trendline points to a growing ability by China to wrest control of the Nine Gates from the U.S. Navy and partner navies. The U.S. Navy estimates that Chinese shipyards currently have a production capacity of roughly 232 times greater gross tonnage compared to the U.S.,

a ratio far greater than the differential between America and Japan during WWII.[24] In terms of raw numerical strength, the PLAN has exceeded the U.S. Navy since the mid-2010s. As of 2020, PLAN "battle force" ships—the total number of "combatant ships, submarines, mine warfare ships, major amphibious ships, [and] large combat support auxiliary ships"—outnumbered USN figures 355 to 296. That gap, moreover, is projected to widen to 475 and at most 317 by 2035.[25] Holding current trends constant, procurement of all types of surface and subsurface vessels adds the equivalent of a Royal Navy-sized fleet to the PLAN's order of battle each year.[26] Together, these trends point toward a breaking of the U.S. Navy's postwar near-monopolies on carrier strike groups and sustained amphibious assaults.

**All Eyes on Taiwan**

More than any other topographical feature, Taiwan is the keystone of the maintenance of any offshore deterrence strategy anchored in the Nine Gates. Much has been written about the geopolitical importance of Taiwan, both to Washington's strategy of neo-containment and to Beijing's strategy of area denial.[27] In brief, control over Taiwan affords Beijing a decisive, if potentially costly, solution to the Nine Gates dilemma.

This is because Taiwan brackets three of the Nine Gates: the Yonaguni Gap, the Luzon Strait, and the Taiwan Strait. Exploitation of the Yonaguni Gap enables PLAN assets to bypass the thickest coverage of U.S. and Japanese aerial and submarine surveillance networks.[28] The Luzon Strait is a major conduit of the subsea communications cables that connect Asian countries to the Internet, global banking, cloud data storage, and telecommunications systems.[29] In economic terms, the Taiwan Strait is the most efficient route to South Asian, Middle Eastern, African, European, and certain Latin American markets for all but three of China's largest ports by cargo volume. By one estimate, one-fifth of all global maritime trade transited the Strait in 2022.[30] In military terms, control over the Strait would grant near-complete freedom of transit to the PLAN's Southern theater command fleet to reinforce its Northern and Eastern branches. Moreover, Chinese strategists are acutely aware that having a hostile political entity on Taiwan means at least the implicit threat of a foreign veto on the free movement of China's commercial and military vessels during a blockade or war—exactly the nightmare outcome for the U.S. that Alfred Thayer Mahan sought to avoid by digging a canal across the Panamanian Isthmus.[31]

On land, meanwhile, Taiwan's topography can potentially become a force-multiplier for Chinese power projection. Leshan in Taiwan's northwestern Hsinchu County already hosts a U.S.-built PAVE PAWS long-range early-warning radar array directed against the mainland.[32] A comparable array constructed near Taiwan's highest peak at Yushan, at 3,952 m (12,966 ft), would give the PLA favorable over-the-horizon radar coverage to detect airborne and surface threats northeast and east of Taiwan. Most of Taiwan's deepwater trade ports face toward the mainland and implicitly buffer PLAN naval power projection. A successful amphibious seizure of Taiwan would enable China to conduct effectively unrestricted naval and aerial transit and area surveillance of at least three of the Nine Gates. Even a "hard Finlandization" outcome, in which the Taiwanese government maintains the appearance of *de facto* sovereignty at the expense of relinquishing customs control, airspace,[33] and other functions, would effectively increase Chinese maritime strategic depth and undo several core geographic anchors of neo-containment.

**Conclusion**

For the United States, the forgoing represents a clear challenge. Current fiscal realities suggest that Washington's response will be significantly constrained at a time of rising Chinese hard power. Operational overstretch, interventionism fatigue and burdensome debt now all present growing constraints to U.S. power projection in the 2020s and beyond.[34]

Meanwhile, the growth of Chinese economic and geopolitical influence exacerbates the security dilemma that

lies at the heart of Xi's vision of the "Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation." Having more overseas interests means that China has more to lose, and the fear of loss underpins an assertiveness to defend what China wants to have. And the rise of maritime security as an indispensable component of Great Power status provides little confidence that today's security dilemmas will be resolved peacefully.

Indeed, the impressive growth of PLA asset production, long-range precision strike, amphibious, fleet-sustainment, and sortie capabilities gives Beijing an increasingly strong strategic hand to exert control over the maritime domain. Washington should plan for the possibility that a more globally integrated China might be more willing to take kinetic action to mitigate the political and geographic factors that constrain its oceanic access. A further uncomfortable reality is that five of the Nine Gates lie partially or wholly within the territorial waters of South Korea, Japan, and the Philippines—all of which Washington is treaty-bound to defend.

In sum, both countries view the Nine Gates as an actionable matter. Should they one day come to blows, it will not be as a result of America's "silicon dependence" on Taiwan's semiconductor sector.[35] Nor will it be because of the ascendant institutional strength of the China hawks in Washington. Rather, hard geopolitical realities will compel the United States to seek to deny the Nine Gates to China. Those same realities will propel the PRC to pursue the greatest freedom of action possibl  .t the Western Pacific.

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# Memorandum

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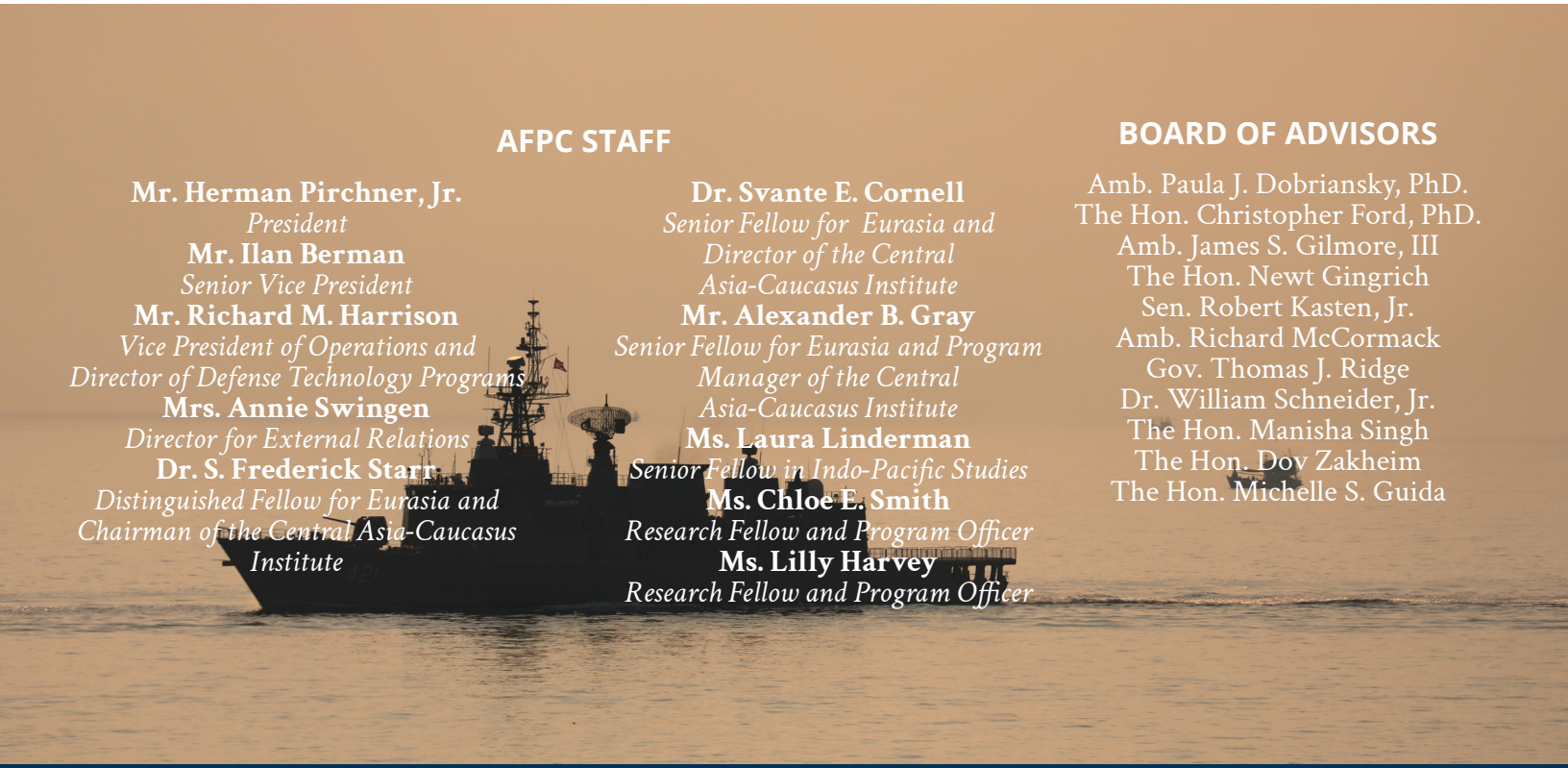



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