

IS CHINA CONVERTING COVID-19 INTO A STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITY?

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Executive Summary

1. Evidence has shown that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and People's Liberation Army (PLA) leadership is taking the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to achieve previously considered costly or impossible strategic goals. Key CCP decisions and actions taken during the COVID-19 period suggest that most Chinese foreign policy actions had been driven by strategic considerations and by the PLA.
2. Recent activities by the PLAN, Coast Guard and Maritime Militia demonstrate the Chinese leadership's view of American military presence and its associated security guarantees of key sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) as unnecessary.
3. The Chinese leadership has thus prioritised the controlling of the South China Sea and developing, validating and maintaining the ability to blunt American abilities in intervening in multiple South China Sea scenarios. This would give China new strategic options in relation to Taiwan, traditional Southeast Asian rivals such as Vietnam, and to control highly valuable fisheries and subsea oil and gas deposits.
4. China could also hold multiple SLOCs at risk in the event of disputes with Japan, the United States, India and other adversaries that have critical dependence on supply chains that transit the South China Sea.
5. The CCP has utilised very low-end and high-end methods in the maritime domain. The low end includes sending 'civilian' fishing vessels to harass civilian and military vessels of various countries. The high end includes deploying hypersonic missiles designed to keep US/Allied Forces confined to the First Island Chain, Second Island Chain, or even the US West Coast.
6. This two-pronged approach is to maximise strategic ambiguity and unpredictability. At the low end, traditional and validated frameworks related to deterrence (pre-event and/or in-event), response protocols, and escalation/de-escalation control become very blurry and difficult to operationalise in dealing with nominally civilian Chinese fishing vessels that only occasionally operate in a multi-modal manner.

7. The United States has recently unveiled new platforms and operational concepts primarily for the First Island Chain, a critical island chain that China needs to break out of in order to become a regional and a global naval power.
8. America's new strategic approach focuses on long-range, ground-launched cruise missiles while arming the United States Marine Corps with variants of the Tomahawk cruise missile and long-range anti-ship missiles. In June the United States deployed an unprecedented three aircraft carrier fleets in a show of strength and resolve.
9. Under this new approach, the Marines will operate much more closely with the US Navy by contributing rapidly deployable, small and mobile Marine units out of a large pool of US Naval assets in the region. This makes the threat of rapid deployment of specialised anti-ship US marine units less predictable.
10. The currently available evidence, including from the pre-COVID-19 period, suggests that the Trump administration will not relent to China on core positions ranging from trade to defence. The Xi administration, meanwhile, has demonstrated a willingness to risk international isolation in terms of reduced access to (or even outright loss of access) advanced markets, financial centres and technology.