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WEBINAR

HOW STRONG IS CHINA'S NAVY?

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HASS: Hello and welcome to our global audience for today's event: How strong is China's Navy? My name is Ryan Hass. I'm a senior fellow as well as the director of the China Center at the Brookings Institution. And I'm delighted to have an opportunity to co-host today's event with my friend and colleague, Bruce Jones. As many of our viewers are aware, China has pulled ahead of the United States Navy by the metric of number of warships. The United States Navy still retains a qualitative edge in several types of platforms, though our job today is not to get sucked into the quality versus quantity debate, it's to push beyond it. We want to examine areas of relative strength and comparative assessment, to begin to understand who could use our Navy more effectively. In the part of the world where conflict is most likely to occur.

We have an all-star group of experts to help us think through these questions. I'm going to be considerably brief in introducing them. Their accolades and backgrounds, are available online. If anyone would like to have a more fulsome view of their backgrounds. Tom Shugart is an independent analyst and consultant, as well as an adjunct senior fellow with the Defense Program at the Center for a New American Security. His research focuses on undersea warfare and maritime competition, military innovation and acquisition, and the broader military balance in the Indo-Pacific. Tom served for more than 25 years in the United States Navy, where he last worked in the Department of Defense's Office of Net Assessment in the Salisbury and sea power research fellow at the Council on Geostrategy. He has written and commented extensively on geopolitics, military innovation and defense acquisitions with a focus on naval warfare.

And Bruce Jones is my co-host in today's events. He is a senior fellow with the Talbot Center for Security Strategy and Technology, as well as the Center for Asia Policy Studies at the Brookings Institution. He is the author, most recently, of the book *To Rule the Waves: How Control of the World's Oceans Shape the Fate of Superpowers*. With that product promotion behind us, let me turn the floor over to Bruce to carry us on the conversation.

JONES: Thank you, Ryan. And it's, thank you for the book plug. And it's a delight to be co-hosting with you as it is to, to be welcoming both Emma and Tom to this series. This is, a joint event of our China Center. And the Talbert Center is part of what we call the season strategy series, where we try

to look at different dimensions of maritime power. What's at stake for the United States in the West, in control of the seas? What is the nature of the challenge that we confront, and other players that matter in this space? Play being play and being an obvious one. But others as well. And look, as Ryan said, you know, we Department of Defense 2 or 3 years ago put out this report, sort of headline grabbing. China now has the world's largest navy. Of course, there are several other countries in the world that have larger navies. And the United States, if you count all boats in DoD, sort of narrowed to large surface combatants to try to get a little bit more granular, got a lot of pushback.

We have more tonnage, we have more quality, etc.. As Ryan said, we want to get past that to a kind of crisper, more nuanced analysis of where are the strengths and where are the comparative weaknesses of the Chinese navy relative to ours in the specific scenarios and in the specific geographies where this will matter? China has a far sea strategy, but I think most people would acknowledge it is nowhere near the kind of capabilities to fight at scale. And that forces but closer to home. And what it refers to the nearest is Chinese naval buildup has been very considerable and of growing quality. So we're going to want to talk about numbers and we're going to talk about quality, but we want to talk more about some of the wider things that will matter here. The way that the naval forces embedded in broader shipbuilding, the way that's embedded in broader maritime capabilities and weapon systems, we're going to talk about readiness.

We're going to talk about specific geographies, and we'll try to get a sense of where it is that the West and the United States are lagging or have or have advantages, and where we might want to focus. Emma, I'd like to start with you, if I could. You recently addressed the UK House of Commons on this question, looking at the pace of Chinese shipbuilding in different aspects and classes of shipping to try to reach a kind of macro conclusion. So delighted to have you as part of this series. Welcome to Brookings. And please go ahead and give us your insights are.

SALISBURY: Thank you very much for having me. I'll just share my screen. I've got some maps and some graphs for you all. And in order to face intensifying strategic competition with the U.S. and its allies, China is pursuing considerable military modernization. The People's Liberation Army has the ambition of fully transforming into a world class force by 2049, which is the centenary of the

establishment of the People's Republic. While the Chinese leadership has not publicly defined what this means, in practice, the strategic context implies that China is aiming to develop military forces which are at least equal to those of the great powers of these threats, most notably those of the United States. However, this does not mean that China will seek to exactly match the US military in each capability area. There will be considerable nuance in which capabilities the leadership believe to be most useful. As the map in front of you shows. From China's perspective, the so-called first island chain is a barrier around adjacent waters.

The South and East China Seas, which constrains China's access to the Pacific. Control of the seas within the first island chain serves a dual purpose. To defend China from external attack through those waters, and to prevent others from being able to deny China access to the high seas beyond. Gaining control of Taiwan, the Senkaku Islands, the Paracel Islands. Part of the islands and other land features within the first island chain is viewed as the best way to secure those objectives. The last eight years, the Chinese leadership has consistently referred to the nation's maritime rights and interests and thereby sees a. Much of its build of maritime power is aimed at both defending these and advancing them. Coercively. While China seeks to modernize its capabilities across all military domains. It is in the maritime domain that the clearest progress can be seen. This slide here is taken from my recent report into the People's Liberation Army Navy Plan, and uses data from Jane's Fighting Ships to show the difference in hull numbers. In the year 2023 the UK, the US and China split out by ship type.

I'd like to give a big shout out to my colleague William Free, who crunched the numbers for me on this. So as you can see from this graph, the plan is now numerically the largest navy in the world with growing numbers of modern multi-mission compartments. It's now arguably the second most capable Bluewater navy after that of the United States. The second graph shows the same navies in the same time periods, but this time it's showing displacement by tons. So China is now the largest shipbuilding nation in the world by tonnage, and continues to grow its shipbuilding capacity for all neighbor classes, as well as in uncrewed systems.

It domestically manufactures things like engines, electronics systems, and armaments for those naval platforms as well. The data here show that the plan is now the largest Navy, the bulk by ship numbers, but it does remain well behind the US Navy in terms of displacement tonnage. In recent years, the plan has begun to perform missions outside the first island chain, gradually extending its ability to perform combat operations outside the range of China's land based defenses. These upgrades include the fleet air defense capability that comes from growing numbers of aircraft carriers, emerging sea based land attack systems, longer range submarines, increasing amphibious capabilities for expeditionary operations, and new long distance replenishment vessels to support operations farther afield. There's considerable interoperability and integration between the Plan, Coastguard, maritime militia and other civilian vessels. Well, the plan has been deployed outside of the first island chain for presence and counter-terrorism missions.

China has tended to use the Coast Guard and the Maritime Militia in regional maritime disputes so far, and this trend is likely to continue. Given the close links between the PLA and the Coast Guard. The militia and civilian vessels, plus the interwoven use in the maritime domain, a full consideration of overall Chinese naval buildup, must consider all four. Like the plan, the Coast Guard is undergoing considerable expansion in modernization, and it's now the largest maritime law enforcement fleet in the world. While the exact numbers are not publicly available, the US Department of Defense estimates that the Coast Guard has over 500 vessels of various sizes. The Maritime Militia is a subset of China's National militia, which is an armed reserve force of civilians available for mobilization. China subsidizes a range of local organizations to operate military units employing maritime workers, particularly fishermen, who are trained as a supplement to their day jobs.

China deploys the maritime militia for low intensity grazing operations and as a massed harassing presence in disputed waters to play a coercive role. As an example, in the last decade, China has built a new Spratly backbone fleet of over 235 large steel hauled fishing vessels which operate in the disputed waters around the Spratly Islands. Another last of the four is the civilian fleet China mandated in 2015. The only built civilian vessels across five main categories must meet specific national defense requirements.

Various images and media reports have since emerged that these modifications, including a very rare ferry fitted with a ramp, the disembarkation of amphibious forces, and a flat that contain a vessel modified as a helicopter landing platform. The military has also used Ray in some limited training exercises for supporting troop movements. As there were no official numbers available. Estimates vary wildly on how many civilian vessels could or would be made available to the plan during a conflict, much less how quickly they could be usefully integrated into military operations. However, some estimates contend that if China requisitioned its entire dual capable civilian fleet, that alone would give it more tonnage than the total American amphibious assault. That's it for me and I'll hand it back.

JONES: Thank you very much. And, we'll unpack several parts of that as we as we go. Tom, I want to pull you in at this stage. By the way, I'm recalling very, very much at this point, a graphic that the economists printed that draw on your drew on your data, looking at the pace of Chinese shipbuilding versus the pace of U.S. and Western shipbuilding, because one of the things that was striking to me, in your graphic was, when you looked at the numerical, you know, the, the chart, the measured by numbers. What struck me less was the fact that they're approaching sort of, you know, parity on the numbers and more. The United States is on this kind of slight decline, and that was one of the very steep rise. And so you take that forward for 5 or 6 years, and we live in a rather different world. But, Tom, you've been thinking about this in an enormous amount of detail. I follow you extensively on Twitter and in your writings as you, as you track, developments in Chinese shipbuilding and Chinese naval development. But you also think more widely about China's maritime power. So over to you for your initial thoughts.

SHUGART: Thanks, Bruce. And that certainly in terms of the naval aspect to it, I mean, everything Emma presented there was fantastic. I agree 100% with and the others are some great graphs there, some of which I had not seen before. So that that was really great for me to see as well. I think the things that Emma says drive home, help the drive home. You know, some of what I've been saying for some time now, which is that people really should understand that China is now the world's premier maritime power by essentially every measure but one. And that's the one graph that Emma showed that showed total aggregate tonnage of all those naval platforms.

They have the world's lot. They're by far the world's largest shipbuilders. They are. They just passed the Greeks as the world's largest ship owners. If you, if you include Hong Kong, which I certainly would, they have done so. The world's largest merchant marine. They have the world's largest fishing fleet by far. They have the world's largest maritime law enforcement by far. And the and the and the and the, for not only of the Coast Guard, but also the Maritime Safety Administration, which has 10,000 plus time maritime safety, ships, which is at a lot of safety. But, and all those measures and then you have it on the naval side, you have the sheer number of holes. They're not a leader. So there's only that one measure by which they are not number one now, and that is naval tonnage, and that is a gap that they are closing.

So, you know, I've done the math over the last decade or so on a tonnage basis as well, China has outfitted the US Navy by about 50% on average over the last ten years. So yes, there's a gap right now, but they're in is definitely closing with no signs of any particular change in trajectory, anytime soon. And I'll show some of the details about why that's the case. You know, certainly, you know, another analysis I did was looking at the average size of average ship size over the last ten years as well. And what you can see there ten years ago is clearly what is reflected in an image chart, which is that the average Chinese ship was much smaller than its, equivalent, than the average US naval warship, mostly frigates and corvettes. And while, the Chinese fleet is still mostly frigates and corvettes, that that composition is changing a lot. And if you look now whereas the average Chinese ship was, you know, 30, 40% the size of the average American warship, now it's more like 60 or 70%. So they close that gap as well to where the average as they are now building aircraft carriers, larger companies, assault ships, the world's largest, surface combatants in the form of the red high cruiser class, the 555.

That gap was really close a lot to where on average, the ships are not going to be that much smaller than ours. When you roll that together. You know, I've kind of done some back of the envelope. Well, more than back in the envelope, you know, some, some analysis trying to estimate what things might look like in 10 or 15 years. And my estimate is that even on a ton of faces, the PLA Navy will equal the US Pacific Fleet in about 2035 or so. So there'll be a parity there. And that's something that I think it really matters when you consider what are the United States' defense objectives.

They're pretty far forward. And almost all of our objectives involve maintaining sea control, at or inside, or at least between the first and second island chain. You gotta remember a country that is your peer across the Pacific, we know from history is not somebody you fight in a western Pacific. It's somebody you end up fighting in the Central Pacific, which is going to make it hard for us to maintain a pretty, not aggressive but pretty forward leaning defensive tactics. We have Add on top of all that, I would also say that, you know, m I talked about maritime power. And I think that is a that's probably a better and another way to look at it, in addition to just who is Navy is stronger. We have to remember that, particularly in terms of the PLA Navy and the PLA writ large, operating in the Western Pacific, a lot of their, the firepower they bring to bear isn't even in the hands of the Navy necessarily. In particular, you've got the PLA Rocket force.

I mean, appealing rocket force, for those not familiar, is an entire surface branch of the of the PLA, you know, equal to the Navy or the Army of the Air Force that is solely built around long range precision strike missiles, mostly conventionally armed. The United States has no equivalent service. It has. It's just now starting to develop and deploy a handful of missiles of equivalent range in capability. And that rocket force brings a lot of power to bear from the land, in the sense of being able to strike thousands of miles from China's coast with precision and at scale. You know, we're not talking a handful of missiles. We're talking hundreds of missiles that could be anti-ship capable. Are they invincible? No, there's a greater range for us. Navy cannot operate at all. No, but there is no doubt that it does affect the calculus, and our ability to maintain at least C control. I've not seen an eye on the Western Pacific. So that all said, to reinforce, you know, I'm. I had some great charts there. I do satellite imagery.

So I'm happy to show a bit of, bit of homework here and share with the audience some of the things that I'm looking at it to kind of bring home the what's happening with, the Chinese Navy. So kind of going north, the south here through China shipyards, starting way up in the north at a holdout shipyard. That is a that is a shaker that builds it builds as an as a true of most Chinese shipyards. It builds, both military and civilian vessels. But in particular, this one is their soul shipyard, for constructing nuclear powered submarines. So you can see here, upper right. That is an image from just a couple of months ago.

That is what I believe is a brand new, type 93 B missile system for, attack submarine now, also likely carrying, cruise missiles, lower port. And you've got three other ones that are at the pier that I think it's hard to know for sure if those are back for repairs or if the new construction, I'm guessing they are new construction. And then interestingly, on the left side in the center, you have what looks to me like the stern section for a new class of submarines, potentially the type 95. Why don't I think it's a new class? I don't know for sure, but I imagine it looks like it's a larger diameter than we're used to seeing. So that's one. That's just one shipyard. A little further south. And Dalian, again, a dual purpose civilian and military shipyard. Here you have under construction five destroyers built at the same time. Five type 52 DLL, a picture in the upper left. There were some Chinese social media. That's when these ships are first under construction in 2022.

This most recent photos from earlier this year. All five of them are under various states of construction simultaneously. Pretty amazing. Next down in, not too far away from their mission. This was a fun one. This was a new class of Chinese corvette that I found. Just looking around, like. Like. Hey, this is this spy 56. No, it's a bit bigger than that. Hey, this is a new class of ships, and sure enough, they're right. So, so Chinese social media, you have some potential images of what this new class of corvettes looks like. Very advanced looking. Rumors are it's a test platform. I keep looking to see if there's another one. Come in. Haven't found one yet, but remains to be seen. But certainly an interesting looking, new platform on top of that. Further south in Shanghai, we have the Zheng Dan shipyard. This is where China built their first, indigenous aircraft carrier. And in it is where they still continue to construct large numbers of vessels.

Here we have six surface combatants in various stages of construction. In the Jiangnan Shipyard. You know, on the right there, you can see one little bow peeking out from the assembly hall. There. I keep watching this one to see the rumored second hull of their next aircraft carrier. The type number, type four. There's been mentioned by PLA officials that there's one under construction. I am able to find it yet, but. But still looking there. Right next door, we have the. Actually, before we move on to that, here's a really great example of the whole dual purpose shipyard thing. And people should understand that if Western companies that are, to a significant extent, funding, these shipyards.

So here we have this is 2021, I believe, we have China's again, the type 003, the first aircraft carrier under construction. What's under construction? Literally in the dock next to it, a container ship, a built for a Chinese. For a Taiwanese company. This never ceases to amaze me. You have an aircraft carrier built that's being built, named after the province from which China routinely threatens invade invading Taiwan. The Fujian next to a container ship being funded by a Taiwanese company. Now they're hardly alone. There's French companies, Western, all kinds of Western companies that are funding this. But we have to have no illusions that what this allows the Chinese to do, they've got all these workers that, you know, there are some things that are different from military construction, but a lot of it's pretty similar to commercial. That's easily fungible workforce.

And what worries me the most is that because unlike US Navy only shipyards, these Chinese shipyards are working in commercial competition. There is still plenty of competition for them. I worry that there they may be even more efficient than our naval shipyards are, because they're having to have real competition all the time. That's honing their edge. That could be applied to, naval vessels. Right next door to the German shipyard. We have the new Hudak shipyard. So this used to be in central Shanghai. They built this new shipyard right next door. You can see it in the upper left. Upper right here. It's literally still under construction. They're still building buildings there. I was shocked when I saw so quickly after they finished the drydock that there were already ships under construction.

This is an amazing place. You have their three more frigates under construction, as well as what is rumored to be a new class of at least assault ship and potentially unique carrier. This is the kind of thing that when people say, oh, well, the Chinese just copy what we do and, you know, there's nothing new there. Well, this is a class of ship that there is no equivalent in the US. We have LHD. We don't have any that have drone, you know, catapults for drones. I mean that's a new thing. The Chinese are doing that. And quite frankly, I wish we saw more of that. From the, from our Navy in some cases. So for at least generation that goes well, as opposed to some of the innovation we've had in recent years, like with LCS. So again, robust work happening really fast. At a timeline. That really surprised me. A little further south. I put this, I put the star in the wrong place. This is a woman. This is not an actress.

So the Wu-Tang shipyard. This is another brand new shipyard, and it used to be a much smaller shipyard that was in central Wuhan. Now it's just outside of the city, or might still be in the city, but it's outside the central city. And they've already bulldozed the old shipyard. It's just it's. I don't know what they're going to think about. I don't know what they're to build their casino or something, but, this brand new shipyard, again, dual purpose pumping out submarines. They're conventional submarines and also, you know, civilian vessels. One thing I noted here and, recently put on Twitter and, an article written about it. As I did see some odd activity here, when I was, you know, I routinely look at imagery from here. I looked at an image in mid-June, and there was all these cranes clustered around where the previous images have been. Somewhere in there. I don't know what happened. I don't know. Who knows? Maybe there was driving piles.

But it looks weird to me. I've gone back and looked at other imagery. In the past, I've never seen cranes cluster like that. I've seen individual cranes working on stuff. But this is it just looks weird to me. So not really sure what happened there. But, again, a very busy ship are building brand new submarines that just built the submarine for, Pakistan, a type 39. So what's going on there, too? Again, stars in the wrong place on the map. Every single one. And then even further south, we have the one crew shipyard, another shipyard in Gwangju. Here you have five again, five frigates under construction at one time, in addition to a couple of white holes. I'm not sure what they are. China coastguard, probably. Meanwhile, U.S. Navy's Constellation class frigate just got delayed by three years. So not great. Going on the further afield, we talked about bases. You know, you could add a dot there on Emma's. Emma's, really great image of how China's, you know, kind of how China sees the world first and change second. I love that image. One dot. It's not on there yet.

That could be in the future. Is this this is their new base and, and really Cambodia, denied by the Chinese and, Cambodians for years, they kind of, sort of still deny it to this day, kind of gaslighting us all. The image we can see with our own eyes what's happening there. This is recent imagery that I posted where I noted, they just finished work and I didn't find the drydock other certain kind of drydock your time ago, but it's done now. And now we can actually measure and see how big it is. 140 meter drydock.

I think it's interesting. It's too small for their frigates, their newer frigates pissed off of their shoulders, and cruisers big enough for a corvette. It's also big enough for submarines, which I think is kind of interesting. It's they definitely don't need it for the Cambodians. Cambodians patrol craft, because what you see right next to it is what appears to be a ramp for pulling smaller, smaller vessels out of the water to do maintenance. Looking around, I tried to find something similar. What do you know? In Qingdao? There's a there is a, a drydock that's almost about the same size. There's a maintenance ramp right next to it. They got submarines in the drydock. Smaller craft on the right. I'm not saying it's 100% sure it's going to be a submarine base, but it's interesting to me that, that some similarities there. So I'll leave it there and happy and move on to our next questions.

JONES: Good. Before I pose a number of questions to each of you, I just wanted to give you a chance to respond to Tom or add anything or comment or anything. You heard that he said that that struck you or that you see differently.

SALISBURY: Thank you and thanks, Tom, for that. That satellite imagery, I think, really shows the scale of the ship building that we're talking about here. And I think the thing that really strikes me is to see a shipyard with five destroyers being built at the same time, five frigates being built at the same time, five submarines being built at the same time. That does not happen in the U.S.. It does not happen anywhere else. I mean, the UK, we could badly dream of such things, but in the US as well, it is surprising that the US shipbuilding has got so bad that the US is this far behind in terms of just the pace of shipbuilding. And those images, I think, really encapsulate that in a way that brings it beyond the abstract and into these are physical ships being churned out.

JONES: So, you know, I think there are a whole series of events we could do on American shipbuilding. I think you've seen now kind of growing consensus in Congress, the Navy, the administration, etc., that we need to kind of significantly boost shipbuilding. Yet to see a coherent plan for that happening or, you know, there's money being allocated. There's not yet really, I think, coherent strategy. But let's table that for today. Come back to it. But one thing that I wanted to pick, so I want to pick up several things from your presentations.

And then we'll move to questions that came from in advance from the audience. One thing that I've always been struck by is that China is doing something that really only France at this stage does in the West, which is to have every part of the maritime sector. Right. They have a major, they have a major shipping firm and Costco, they have shipbuilding, they have the Navy, they have the Coast Guard. The United States still has, you know, very, very sophisticated, very large navy. But we've essentially lost the commercial side of the of the business. And that's very significant, I think, for the reasons that Thomas sort of laid out in terms of looking at the assets that you gain in shipbuilding by having both the commercial and the naval, the naval capabilities.

I was always also very struck by your point about Western companies that are investing and, in Chinese shipyards, that's a real factor. These ships are all being built with Australian steel, which strikes me as sort of ironic, given the nature of the, the issues that we confront in the amount of money that Australia is going to spend on submarines to worry about the ships that they're helping build. It is a kind of strange moment in the, in the West relationship. I want to start not with specific ships or qualities or other constraints. I want to start with, strategy. Among one of the things that you pointed out and certainly being president in my thinking, is that if you look at Chinese naval doctrine, if you look at what they're thinking about, if you look at how they're right, it's clear that. The first impulse.

Not necessarily the only one, but the first impulse is to defend, against potential foreign invasion and to deny anybody else, namely us, from denying them the ability to flow goods, through the, through the South, trying to see these, trying to see to kind of, you know, choke off their, their imports. And I always wonder whether we can't imagine a future where we exist in something that looks like mutually assured denial. They can't deny us from operating. We can't deny them from operating. And whether that could ultimately be stable. Sounds very bumpy to get there, but whether it might ultimately be stable, since neither of us have the slightest interest in denying the flow of goods through those waters. It strikes me as sort of a little bit illogical that we're at loggerheads over the question of denial. But of course, there are other issues in their in their strategy, sort of wish list. So I don't know if you want to make a first comment, either of you, about, beyond the potential Taiwan scenario, which we'll come back to. What are the things that China wants to do with its navy? In the, let's say, in the next ten years?

SALISBURY: The key thing to bring into that thought, which I do agree with, is that the problem fundamentally comes down to the fact that although China is ultimately attempting to defend its regional waters, defend itself from attack from the Pacific and so on, it is doing that in a coercive way towards other nations. So although I could see a scenario in an alternate world where China felt secure enough to not be making those coercive moves in the South and East China Seas, not be so hostile, not be so aggressive, not be so belligerent. There is a way that I could see in this alternative world where there could be a very nice balance between the rights and interests of China and Japan and South Korea and the Philippines and so on and so on, as well as the United States. But the thing is, we don't live in that world. And the way that China is approaching this is in a very harassing and coercive manner. And it's that behavior that I think is going to be what drives the march towards conflict around these issues in a way that is not necessary to actually resolve. And in terms of keeping everyone's goods flowing information, data, etc..

SHUGART: Tom and Nathaniel disagree with their, and, I think in terms of that, hostile environment that they're kind of creating for themselves. It's always interesting for me to see what they, the things that they say the players for. You know, it's for maritime rights and interests. And it all sounds very, anodyne and the things that other nations say, except when you understand what they mean by sovereignty, for example, you know, sovereignty in many cases. And in their mind, being places where other people live or other people have legal rights, too. So that's why you end up with, you know, China Coast Guard ships, water cannons, Philippine boats. I mean, that's, you know, or them threatening, routinely threatening Taiwan. So it's a lot of it. And when I, it's a matter of interpretation and one that's an interpretation that I think is contrary to international law. But, if we're looking at our ten years in a war, the Chinese want to, achieve.

Well, I mean, if 2027 really is when the PLA needs to be ready to invade Taiwan, it's crippling. Really did tell them to be ready for that. You know, part of being able to do that is going to be to take the measures necessary to safeguard, you know, what the Chinese economy needs to survive for however long I think they need to, to do something like that. So I think certainly. And again, what, you know, what do they want to do? Will they say what they want to do? And one of the things they say

they want to do is, is to secure their silence, communication and to protect their overseas interests. That's going to be one part of being able to do something like Taiwan is to have some reasonable assurance of, to some degree, at least, security, their, their sea line certification. I think in many cases people dismiss, their ability to do so more than I think is warranted. When I look at the question of how could they maintain those sea lines, I think of Julian Corbett. So Julian Corbett, you know, back in early 20th century, wrote about how for, a trading nation, that's that the British Empire now China, which is by far the largest trading nation in the history of humanity, you know, to maintain those lines, communication in the back, then they would rely on, he thought they could rely on the, the high seas, basically, that once shipping was able to clear terminal areas and get it out of the high seas, that it was really because its oceans are so vast, it was going to be hard to hunt down shipping once they get clear terminal areas.

I think that may be true again now, but for a very different reason, which is the internationalization shipping. So if you're trying to cut off China or cut off their oil or whatnot, let's take the example of the Ever Given, the ship that everybody has heard about, because it's the one that ran aground in the Suez Canal a few years ago. So if ever given was, if I can remember, a Japanese built, Japanese owned, chartered to a Taiwanese company with Indian and Indian crew carrying goods from China to Europe. So do you think that ship, if you're in a conflict with, with China on the high seas. Yeah, yeah. Boarding. Stop it. I mean, that's a much harder question that I think people might think. So if China can secure, again, secure its terminal areas in the way that Corbett said, which would basically mean the approaches the South, you know, in the South China Sea, inside the island chain, if they can secure that area that it's safe enough for shipping to operate there, then maybe that's all they need. And I think that's that could be reflected in the way we're seeing things develop there with the ADM bases and really, impressive development of, land based sea power, that could be used to secure that area.

JONES: I want to then pivot to a different topic. And I'm going to start with you, Tom. You, when you laid down your initial remarks, said there's only one remaining area. We're trying to sort of, you know, fall second in terms of the metrics, which is, tonnage. And then, of course, specifically in aircraft carriers. But truly, there's also one very important place where there's a quality to differentiation,

which is going to matter, which is in submarines. You've got long experience in submarines, so I defer to you. But, I think by common concern, American submarines are still significantly more capable than, than Chinese submarines. If we were talking about a different scenario in different parts of the world would be hearing a lot more about Russian submarines, which are very, very capable, Chinese submarines, still less capable. And American submarines are not, in the in the target set of the rocket force. I mean, they're kind of, you know, much more significant limitations on China's capacity to stop American submarines from operating and doing significant damage to sensors, to rocket forces, to the Russian high class. I mean, there are a lot of things that the submarine force could do, that at this stage, China is going to have a difficult time, preventing. So could you just reflect on, how that factors into your, your sense of the comparative balance?

SHUGART: Yeah. So one thing, you know, there are not too many places as an ex or that you can say a lot about the quality of, in detail, the quality of submarines. But we're lucky in that 2015. Oh, and I, an Office of Naval Intelligence did put out a chart that showed Chinese nuclear submarines and how noisy they were compared to other, submarines. And it's very clear that you're you can I can point that out and say, yep, their nuclear submarines are very loud. At least the ones that are under construction still to this day, they're the same classes that are under construction. There may have been some marginal improvements here and there, but that is the same, by and large, the same classes. Now, as I pointed out in my presentation, there may be a new class under construction and that, you know, all bets could be off. We're not comes out no idea how loud or quiet that one's going to be. So certainly absolutely a qualitative difference there.

One thing I think is worth understanding is that different nation submarine forces can be used for different things. And that we should remember that what? You know, whether we win or not, you know, even in the undersea isn't so much a matter of what do our submarines beat their submarines? It's which side can more effectively use the undersea environment to achieve its defense objectives. And that may be done in very different ways. Like I would say for now, I don't think there's any doubt on the I wouldn't think there was any doubt on the part of the Chinese that they're going to go out and hunt down U.S. submarines. Like that is just not happening. Like trying to hunt a submarine on a in a loud submarine is like trying to hunt a deer on a Harley Davidson.

This is not going to work. So they're going to hear you coming. So. Yeah. So that's not that's not honestly what their submarine force is going to be for. It's it may be for blockading Taiwan and maybe for making life hard for U.S. carriers on the Philippine Sea. It may be for an, in the near future, launching cruise missiles at Guam, for example, or from another Canadian Hawaii. So they could be for very different things. Do we have an advantage in the undersea? Absolutely. You know, our submarines are much quieter. The things that worry me about it is that our production rates are not keeping up. We just gave up and pushed the submarine to the one submarine to the right in the budget. We just delayed the next class of U.S. submarines, as I said, by five years.

Not because it didn't make sense to go ahead and develop it sooner, but because it just wasn't enough money to do it. With your with the other combination. So here we are engaged in if you're paying attention at all, you know what is clearly, the most important competition we have right now with our greatest competitor generations. And we're just, you know, just there's not enough money being applied to do everything we need to do. So I worry about that advantage over the longer term. And then, of course, we have maintenance problems. Something like 40% of US submarine forces in maintenance. So it should be more like 20%, which really affects the number of ships we can get out there. So, so I do I worry about the numbers and I worry about the future, and I worry about, Chinese improvements, but it is an area of remaining US superiority. I want to.

JONES: Pose, two last quick questions, and then, Ryan, I think there's a number of questions that came from the audience that we all feel posed to. To both of you. One goes to the question of global versus Pacific capacity on the American side. Right. So, Tom, you referenced the fact that the pace building and the capability will outpace the Pacific Fleet. Now and I could have could argue this in both directions. On the one hand, you know, I spent a lot of time these days thinking about submarines. Russian submarines are awfully sophisticated. You know, in the undersea world, Russia is the pacing threat, not China. We're going to be paying attention to the Russians are doing there. On the other hand, in. Build up to a scenario, it's perfectly possible to move aircraft carriers and submarines from one theater to another. I mean, it takes time, but it can easily be done. So do we really only need to be looking at what capabilities we have currently in the Pacific?

Or is it not the case that we could bring wider capabilities to bear in specific scenarios? That's one question. This is for either of you or both of you. And then second, and this probably pushes in the other direction, thinking about relative, strengths and weaknesses. Tom, you had this incredible graphic you used in congressional testimony. I wish I had, pull it out or had you pull it out or you looked at, merchant militia, merchant fleet, capabilities on the U.S. side and the Chinese side and the US sort of levels are here until the end of the Cold War and then sort of drop in half, and they're kind of here. And then the Chinese capabilities do that. And I think about the business of fighting war in the Pacific with a lot of our rear supply in San Diego or Seattle or even Hawaii, and trying to get it across the Pacific, versus China, fighting 90 miles from its eastern, eastern shore. So, those two issues, the global nature of the, of the American capability, and whether or not we can or to what extent we can move stuff to the Pacific in given scenarios and then the logistical backbone, I think contextualize, this, this, this conversation. So either of you wanted to comment on those two and then we'll move to audience questions.

SHUGART: I'll defer to. Emma on the move into forces from Europe, because she's the one who works would be affected by that.

SALISBURY: And as European, who is sitting much closer to Russia than the rest of you on this call. I would quite like to be protected from them, but. So the question is whether European NATO allies can take up the slack. If the US Navy were to pull out some of its forces from the Atlantic and move them to the Indo-Pacific. I think that's something that is remains to be seen. Of course, with the war in Ukraine and various other factors, a lot of European countries are upping their defense spending and are investing in navies. But naval capabilities take a long time to build up. So it's all going to come down to a very fine balance between when European navies can take up that slack to allow the US Navy to shift to the Indo-Pacific if it needs to, and it's going to be very, very finely balanced. I'll also say a quick word about AUKUS. This is why AUKUS is so important. The submarine deal between Australia, the UK and the US, because that will really add to the undersea fleet in the Indo-Pacific, which again takes a more slack, of the US Navy. But of course, building these new submarines is going to take a long time. So again, this is something that will come in the future rather than something that will come in the next 2 or 3 years, when it may be important.

JONES: Yeah. I just wanted to say for context, like, I'm not thinking about sort of, you know, as should pull all of its assets out of the Middle East and Europe. I'm just thinking in specific scenarios that have kind of a period of a few months. You know, we can move aircraft carriers around, we can move submarines around. We do it in response to scenarios now. So I just wanted to add that point to context. I'm not thinking about an overall shift in balance, but a temporary shift. Tom on the merchant side or the logistics side anything.

SHUGART: Yeah. I mean, you see me beat that drum, obviously. You know, that's that is the part that worries me. I mean, you know, during World War Two, when we fought the battle of the Atlantic and, you know, we had shipping going, going across the, back and forth across the Atlantic in the hazardous conditions, you know. You know, it was it certainly wasn't all us shipping. A lot of it was British and Canadian. But the fact of the matter was, it was in the hands of allies. Allies that could tell those people. Yeah, you're going to make that trip back and forth across the Atlantic. And, you know, we're going to self-insure, you know, it's not going to be up to Lloyd's of London to decide whether we win or lose this war. We'll do National Insurance, etc.. You know, in a conflict with China, you know, the US now, the US Mercury now can only supply a few like single low single digit percentage of US trade. The rest of it's owned by other people or at least flagged in other places. So we will not have the ability to tell other people's ships.

And, you know, you're going to keep coming here to do, you know, deliver the goods we need delivered and the energy flows we delivered in the middle of a conflict with China. Let's say China creates an exclusion zone off the East coast, the United States. And maybe they have some nuclear submarines that can, you know, go a little further afield. Who are we to tell other all these nations ship to come across? And on the other hand, you have this just so for perspective here this we're scale matters right. And so I'm in an average year now builds up. And last year was 26 million tons of merchant shipping on an average peacetime year at the peak of the US emergency shipbuilding program in World War two, where we built thousands of ships that supported armies of millions of troops on other side of the world.

We bought less than that 18.5 million tons. And that's just an average year for China. If you look at the merchant Marines we fought last time around. I did do a quick look up tag. If you look up, the Japanese merchant marine when we started World War two, had six, according to charge. Leaped at 6 million times. Merchant shipping. That's. And it's about what? I figured about ten. Something like that. Six and 10 million tons. A merchant shipping China, if you include Hong Kong, has hundreds of millions of tons of merchant shipping at this time with before even getting started. So the difference is just, it's not good. It's really not good. And it is very, very large asymmetry and not a good one.

JONES: You wonder about their dependencies. So, of course, they've been very preoccupied by this. Far back as the Iraq War, talking about their Malacca dilemma. That dilemma has only grown. They're more dependent on sea based imports, and they were more dependent now on sea bass imports and exports than they were then. So it does seem to me that in a kind of crisis scenario, they have to be at least as worried as we do about the interruption of sea bass flows. Now, we know from history that mutual dependence is not a barrier to war. Fine. But the severity of their of their dependence on sea based flows has to be something that plays in their minds, at least to some extent. We might want to come back to that at some stage, but I want to turn to Ryan. Any questions or thoughts or concerns that he has for us to bring in? We have a very large audience for this, this session, and we want to get to some of their questions.

HASS: Well thank you Bruce, I'm going to introduce a few questions that we've received from our audience. And the two questions I will start with relate to areas of perceived advantage for the United States. We've talked a lot over the past 45 minutes about, the enormous strides that China is making. One perceived advantage that I want to ask if it is in fact, the actual, benefits United States is allied capacity. The second is on basing. So the question on Allied capacity. Are there other regional navies with whom we are allies who can complement existing U.S. naval power? Vis-a-vis China? Are there other comparative advantages that other navies have in the region or around the world that are allied with us, that we would be able to bring to bear in the event of any type of confrontation or conflict with China? Over to you.

SHUGART: And by being from an elevation, I'll. I'll defer to her to get through.

SALISBURY: Thanks, Tom. I think the important thing to remember, first of all, is that China doesn't really have allies. The US is very lucky to have such good friends in the Indo-Pacific. So have the Japanese, the Filipinos, the South Koreans, and so on and so on and so on. And these allies in that region provide a network both of military capability but also of bases. So the US bases in Japan, and in South Korea, and in that kind of first island chain, second island chain region gave the US advantage to be able to counter China's bases on its own land. So I think the only way that the US, counter China in the Indo-Pacific is with its allies. And also going back to what I was saying about the Atlantic, the allies in Europe will also be able to help.

You know, I don't think that the Royal Navy, French Navy, etc. are going to be sending warships to the Indo-Pacific. But what we can do, as I said, is to take up the slack in your land, take to allow the US to move assets to the Indo-Pacific should it be needed, and we can help out with various other things as well behind the scenes. But the fact that the US has this network of friends and allies is, I think, a big advantage over China. China does not have allies. It barely has friends, it has vassal states. And that is a very, very different relationship, and one that I think the US has a great advantage in.

SHUGART: I certainly I agree with all that. In particular, I think probably the some of the most important aspects of the Allied relationship in the region is probably access and basing. I mean, you know, the US, the only US territory, there is Guam. And, I mean, obviously there's some other small Micronesia that's have plenty of relationships there, but the only real U.S. territory is Guam. And, that's just not enough real estate to when you've got that precision strike capabilities of the scale that, the Chinese do to have a survivable operation. So it is going to require the, you know, access to allied facilities and, and quite frankly, a lot more than we have access to right now. I think, to be able to survive and we operate in a, you know, in the run up a high in conflict there, in terms of capabilities at sea. Yeah. Our allies, babies out there have some great capabilities. The Japanese in particular. Submarine force is very capable. Are diesel, some diesel electric submarines.

So not only fast, but in terms of, you know, some somebody you don't want to be in a dark alley with, you know, in some a choke point in the first island chain, a Japanese submarine is very much, you know, along those lines, very quiet, very capable. South Koreans also have some, some very capable submarines. Are the South Koreans really going to get involved, particularly in a conflict? I'm not so sure about that. But, you know, certainly there's capability there. And of course, the Japanese have a, you know, very capable escorts, in the form of their destroyers and frigates. That they are making new ones are doing well, their shipbuilding as well. And I think also, you know, shipbuilding is something we have to look at, as an area of synergy.

You know, I would be perfectly fine with saying, you know, if our if our ship, our capacity cannot sustain the expansion we need, we need the in the short term. I would be fine with, you know, ships hulls being built in Japanese and South Korean shipyards. I mean, we've done it before. I know people, it's not politically feasible. We'll never spend money in, you know, overseas shipyards. Well, let's be grownups here. I mean, the last time we, you know, World War Two, there was a there was free intermingling of ships between the US, Canadian, Royal Navy, you know, the British Navy. Ships are built in each other, shipyards. You know, we need to get the capability word exist for how do we build it up? More of a longer term will be become independent again. And it can also reach the numbers we need for right now over time. But let's be adults about this in terms of what's needed now to avoid disaster. Right.

HASS: I have two more questions from the audience that I'm gonna put on the table before I turn things back to Bruce. The first goes to an earlier portion of the conversation we were having about measuring China's naval ambitions. And Tom was talking about, the priority that has been placed on, you know, sea lions in the South China Sea and, and, and surrounding areas. The question from the audience is, how do we know China's naval ambitions? Are they global or are they more regional, in their focus?

SHUGART: I would say we know because they've told us so. If you look at their defense white papers, you can see them talking about what are what are their defense objectives. And it is it is, you know, maritime rights and, and, maritime rights and, privileges after the term, the exact term I use,

overseas interest to talk about maintaining few lines of communication. This, this, the CIA. The communication part is interesting to me because lots of countries say that. I mean, you know, I'm sure the UK has documents that they maintain their silence communication. So that's hear everybody says that, right? But let's all be honest here. There's nobody else on the planet. But if the United States is the world's most powerful naval force, if it decided it was going to cut your colony off. It could do it, you know, not that we would ever contemplate that of their allies, but let's be clear that there is no country on the planet that could prevent the US from as the most powerful naval force from affecting its sea life. China knows that China is serious about. And they say they want to maintain their flocks. They're the only country on the planet that actually might have the ability to do that in the future. And we can see that and we can see that in the scale of the force forces, they're ability.

SALISBURY: But, the plan has been very specific about wanting to do proper Bluewater operations beyond its regional seas. And one of the ways it's done that is, it joined, a ongoing counterparts mission of Eden and back in 2008. And it's been contributing since then. This isn't for any kind of, you know, charitable wish to destroy pirates for the good of the international community. It is a laboratory for them to practice blue water operations. It's a way for their officers to get command experience out on the blue water. And it's a way to test their logistics lines and so on. So that should give you an inkling of the fact that they are looking to expand outside of regional operations onto the blue water, whether that's in the Pacific or the Indian Ocean or beyond.

SHUGART: Right. I'll think about that one on the counter piracy mission, as though now in the aftermath of actually not it's not aftermath, it's still happening in light of the Houthi, interdiction of trade in the Red sea, though, we now we now know just how hollow that Chinese, statement that they were there to protect international shipping was because they are clearly have not helped at all, with trying to protect international shipping. And I, you know, their ships are to, you know, by agreement with the who these are getting a free pass along with the Russian ones. So it does appear that their, reasons for being there weren't quite as genuine as they were thought. Maybe some people thought they were. I think I was a record on it, but. Right. There you go.

HASS: So altruism is not, the objective of, the PLA Navy force in that part of the world. Final question that I will put on the table for the time being, relates to a topic that Tom introduced a moment ago about drone carriers. How much of a threat are China's new drone carriers, and how is the United States working to meet this new threat?

SHUGART: So when you say drone carriers, so there was a recent report of, yeah, a drone specific, very small aircraft. Look like an aircraft carrier. I went to China Shipyards. Mike Dom, fantastic analyst. Found that I thought it was a great. It doesn't look to me like it's likely a combat platform at this point. I think it's probably something for supporting exercise, and it's just not big enough to really carry, you know, combat aircraft. And we do have that type 76, which is clearly built. So we think I should say clearly rumors are that it is going to be a drone aircraft carrier. I personally advocated for this in, proceedings in 2017, I wrote an article saying United States Navy should build an aircraft carrier that is exclusively built to launch uncrewed aircraft. I still believe that to this day, I think such a vessel would be would shed a lot of the liabilities that go along with crewed aviation, would allow new possibilities for ways to operate that I just don't think you're ever going to quite get there as long as crewed aviation is in the mix. So I invite people to go look at that article. You know what? You know, no, we didn't build it. The Chinese did. So, there you go.

HASS: Emma, would you like to come in on this question or should we turn it back to Bruce?

SALISBURY: I agree with everything Tom, said, I. It's one of those capabilities that I think, as Tom argued in his article, the U.S. Navy should be looking at. I also recommended that in a recent report about the Royal Navy, I think uncrewed launch from sea platforms is the next big thing, and we should be having orange capabilities, as well as the Chinese having this. It'll be really interesting to see how that develops. The Chinese do tend to iterate their designs by just building. So they'll build something, test it, make it work, build something slightly better. So we'll see how it develops. Hopefully through a lot of satellite imagery.

SHUGART: I think that's a great point. And what makes there on that iteration. And I think and then the last step that we usually we've seen with that is once they finally get the design right, then they

crank it out in huge numbers like we see now, like you see in the destroyers. They kind of they built a lot of 1 or 2 ship classes along the way. And finally at the time, 52, they kind of get what they wanted. And now you see them just cranking them out. One thing I add on the drone thing is, one drama kind of like to be is that. I think we should understand that, at least when we're talking like a Western Pacific conflict, we're open ocean, high seas. I think sometimes people get a little too excited about drones in some ways, because there are no engineering miracles that they accomplish. All the if you look at the, the drone warfare that's happening in Ukraine, people get very excited about that. And it's great, like for land combat.

Oh, yeah. And it's not transformative, at least very, very significant. But like all these quadcopters that we see, those go about 20km. I mean, so translate that in nautical miles. That's the 12 mile line you're talking. That's as far as those things go, as basically the 12 mile line. The, you know, Royal Navy's, in terms of high seas, high end combat, have been dealing with drones since they invented the cruise missile. I mean, that is a that is the original one way kamikaze drone. You know, a drone was on steroids. So in many cases, I think it would be a little less, change than people might think in some ways. And really high end, open ocean, naval warfare, but leave it at that.

JONES: I very much agree with that. And, we should also look at underwater drones, UVs as opposed to, sort of air drones, where of course, we already have, UAV carriers or called submarines just limited in terms of how many of the things you can launch from. But we can launch quite important things from, from a submarine to sort of have effects in the undersea space. I just wanted to address one, one issue. As we wrap, a lot of the commentary that comes into this is the question of whether or not, it's a significant strength or we put it in reverse. Does the PLA have a significant weakness and sort of a lack of combat experience and lack of combat readiness? I will, however, note that, before the Houthis started lobbing stuff at us in the Red sea, there was no serving U.S. naval captain that had ever fought their ship under fire.

We've had such dominance in the high seas for so long that our Navy has not actually had to fight. I mean, we've lobbed things at people. We have not had to defend ourselves in a firefight for a very long time. So we have advantages and combat readiness in terms of issues like emissions control,

electronic warfare and C4 ISR, which I think will matter. I think I underestimated sometimes in, in, in the relative strengths and weaknesses of the two in, in potential scenarios. But I'm not so convinced that combat readiness is quite such a, a delta between the two, between the two services in that sort of scenario. Look, I want to wrap this up as we approach time. I will note, by the way, Tom, that the phrase trying to hunt a deer with a Harley Davidson is definitely making an appearance in my next book. It'll be a fully quoted two, but it's a terrific, terrific imagery of the state of current submarine warfare might look very different 5 or 10 years from now. Look, I think we achieved the objective here, which was that this was sobering, very sobering, but not fear mongering. It was specific.

It was, credible. I think we have a richer understanding of the nature of why it is that China's strength is so significant in the PLA and space, both in terms of the numerical, the qualitative. But I think particularly in terms of the kind of comprehensive nature of their sea power, which in some key variables we, we lack. So I think it sets us up for, a number of further dives on, on shipbuilding and on some of the other pieces of the puzzle we touched on, but didn't dive too deep on the Allied question. I think there are things to kind of play with there, especially around the Japanese submarine fleet. The obvious question over time. And so we'll come back to those topics. But thank you for joining us. We have a terrific audience online. Thank you to them for being here, especially when they could be watching the Olympics. But, particular thanks to Tom and Emma and then my friend Ryan for co-hosting today. Thank you all.