

A Neo-Mahanian Reading of Turkey and China's Changing Maritime Geopolitics



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ABSTRACT

An eroding perception of maritime peace worldwide and radical questioning of global sea hegemony have emerged as a rapidly growing trend in global politics amidst the demise of *Pax Americana* and the rise of multipolarity. With US global hegemony in decline, China has developed into a leading actor to reignite international cooperation based on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In this environment, there arises a strong need for a closer reading of the changing character of maritime geopolitics within the context of BRI. To address this need, the present article aims to offer a comparative study of recently escalating tensions in the South China Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean. Drawing on a neo-Mahanian conception of maritime geopolitics, this article seeks to answer the following questions: How are South China Sea and Eastern Mediterranean geopolitics shaped by the multipolarization of world politics? What are the key dynamics leading to these changes? How do such changes in one region condition those in another? In what respects are Turkey and China's geostrategic imperatives affected in this situation? The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) represents the maritime route of BRI, whose starting point is located in the South China Sea and whose final destination is the Eastern Mediterranean, conceived of as a strategic bridge between China and Europe. It follows that BRI's maritime economic potential primarily relies on South China Sea and Eastern Mediterranean security, i.e. both ends of MSR, whose prospects are intertwined together. One could observe that both Turkey and China suffer from increasing US interventionism at first hand and they have developed similar geostrategic doctrines embodied in the Turkish "Blue Homeland" doctrine and the Chinese "Blue National Soil" doctrine. China and Turkey's shared geopolitical imperatives and geostrategic conformity are to be better grasped by policy-makers for the future success of BRI.

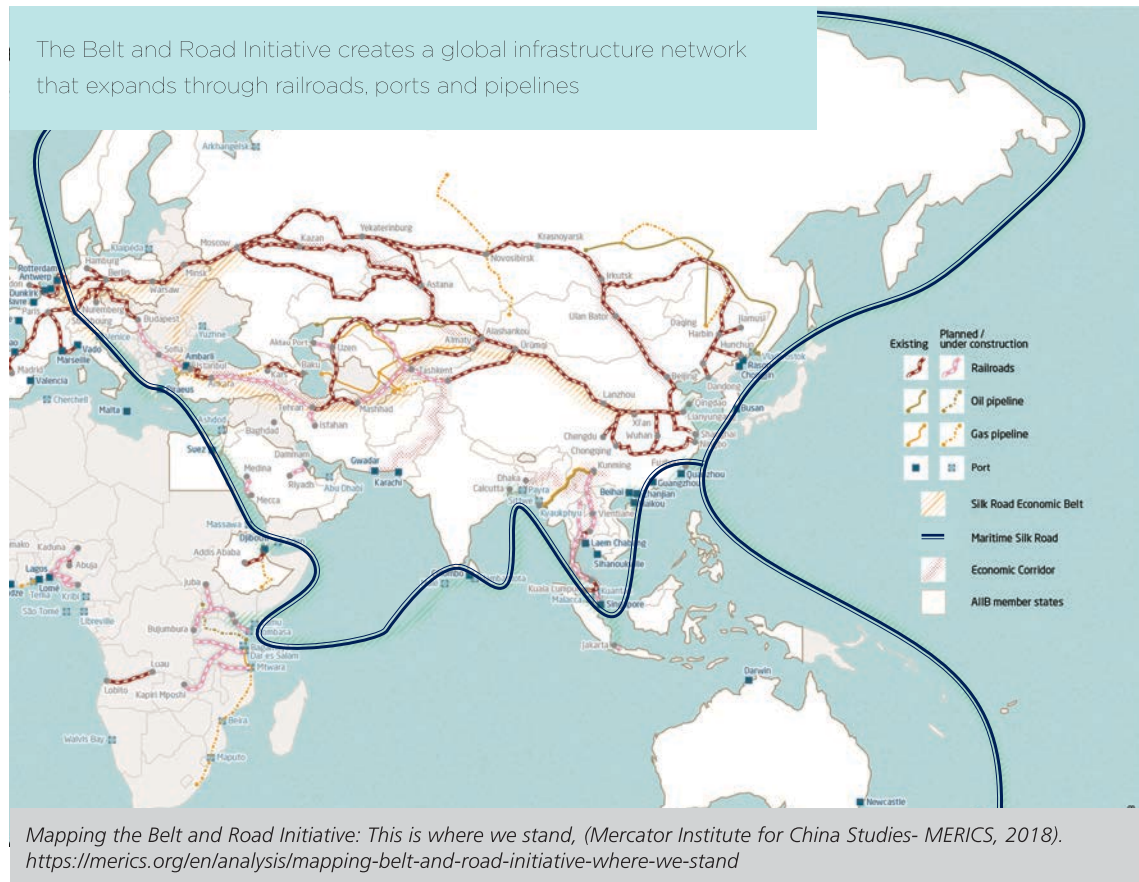
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It is difficult to overestimate the importance of maritime geopolitics in the study of international relations, even for the simple fact that the oceans cover 71% of the earth's surface. Acquiring sea power and controlling inland waterways for both economic and diplomatic supremacy have always been of indispensable value to those states seeking world domination in the history of international relations. It would not be an understatement to argue that all historical periods of global hegemony that have shaped the course of world history such as *Pax Romana*, *Pax Bri-*

tannica, and *Pax Americana* were rooted in a so-called "universal naval peace" (Reynolds, 1974).

The present epoch testifies to a radical calling into question of global sea hegemony amidst the demise of *Pax Americana* and the rise of "multipolarity" (Gürçan, 2019). On the one hand, the United States of America (US) has become a pole of instability in global politics by abusing its leadership position and renouncing its claim to be the provider of common prosperity. This situation is reflected with much clarity in the self-declared "brain death" of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the termination of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the dangerous erosion of



the United Nation's (UN) authority, the persistent undermining of the World Health Organization's (WHO) status, and global environmental governance the continuing effects of the worst economic crisis since the 1930s, and the spiraling out of control of US military interventions worldwide (Gürcan, 2019/2020; Gürcan & Kahraman, 2020).

On the other hand, one of the strongest responses to the crisis of hegemonic global governance has come from China, which launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to reignite international cooperation. Though often designated by the West as a China-owned infrastructure and investment project, BRI seeks the collective leadership and active participation of all countries in-

involved. At the heart of BRI's logic lies the concept of shared development, which represents values centered on the principles of respect to diversity and national sovereignty. BRI has now acquired the status of world history's largest and most comprehensive initiative for development and trade cooperation, with 152 countries having already signed up. In such an environment, there is a need for a comparative reading of maritime geopolitics in the context of BRI.

Considering the current state of US global hegemony in permanent crisis and China's leading contributions to shared development, this article addresses the need for a comparative reading of the changing maritime geopolitics in BRI's context. The research focus is on recent-

ly intensifying tensions in the South China Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean. In methodological terms, the article uses incorporated comparison, which consists of “understand[ing] the complexity of global phenomena by addressing cross-case commonalities, mutual influences, and interdependencies in tandem with spatial or temporal variations, historical specificities, and internal tensions for a fuller understanding of a global configuration at hand” (Gürcan, 2019: 6). The main idea here is to reveal historical connections and mutual conditioning among the cases under study (McMichael, 1990, 2000). In this study, this historical and mutual relationality is reflected in the extent to which US interventionism and increased multipolarity have combined to transform Turkey and China’s geostrategic imperatives in tandem. The research questions are the following: How are South China Sea and Eastern Mediterranean geopolitics shaped by the multipolarization of world politics? What are the key dynamics leading to these changes? How do such changes in one region condition those in another? In what respects are Turkey and China’s geostrategic imperatives affected in this situation? The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) represents the maritime route of BRI, whose starting point is located in the South China Sea, opening up to its first stop in Hanoi, and whose final destination is the Eastern Mediterranean, conceived of as a strategic bridge between China and Europe. It follows that BRI’s maritime economic potential primarily relies on South China Sea and Eastern Mediterranean security, i.e. both ends of MSR, whose prospects are intertwined together. Eastern Mediterranean security is not only vital for China’s BRI but it also has the potential to affect the global geopolitical balance

(Behrendt, 2019; Pencea, 2018; Mediterranean Affairs, 2018). Keeping these questions in mind, the present article explores in greater depth the historical and mutual relationality of the South China Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean from a neo-Mahanian perspective.

Conceptual Framework

Often designated as the intellectual father of the American navy (Yoshihara & Holmes, 2008), Alfred Thayer Mahan’s thought has preserved its significance in military thinking. In his magnum opus, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History: 1660–1783*, Mahan (1999) cites sea power as one of the chief factors determining the level of national wealth and prosperity. In his view, sea power hinges on overseas trade, a powerful navy that ensures the security of trade activities, and the presence of overseas colonies (Mahan, 1999; Hattendorf & Jordand, 1989). Furthermore, the attainment of these outcomes is conditional on a set of six factors: geographical position, physical/geographical conformation, territorial size, population size, national character, and the character of the government (Mahan, 1999). The following two sections will address these conditions based on the cases of Turkey and China, while the remainder of the present section will be devoted to a conceptual exploration of the Mahanian list of the “six fundamental elements of sea power”.

Geographical position can be explained by reference to the cases of Britain and the US. To the difference of countries where land defense exigencies suppress interest in the field of naval defense (e.g. France and the Netherlands), Mahan describes Britain and the US as insular rather than continental powers who are shielded by the sea from external attack, which in turn

enables greater focus on naval defense and expansion. In this respect, US maritime geopolitics can be said to thrive on access not only to the Atlantic, Pacific, and Arctic Oceans but also to the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea (Mahan, 1999; Stavridis, 2018).

In Mahan's framework, sea power also requires physical, or geographical conformation, which can be maximized by the possession of ample natural resources and mild climate. Equally important in this regard are proximity to economic centers, logistical connectivity, the possession of navigable inland waterways, and the availability of well-protected natural harbors and long coastlines. One could argue that natural resource wealth can also potentially increase with territorial size. From Mahan's (1999) perspective, the "territorial size" element may offer additional potential advantages such as increased defense capacity and economic dynamism, which can even be maximized through greater "population size" (Mahan, 1999).

Finally, the real potential of these geographical/physical, territorial, and demographic advantages can only be realized if a country aspiring to become a true sea power possesses an enabling cultural foundation and political environment. In cultural terms, sea powers are to thrive on a deeply ingrained love of money and trading skills coupled with an inclination and ability to build overseas posts. Moreover, Mahan (1999) insists that these cultural characteristics are also to be combined with persistent state policies that accord due importance to naval power and maritime trade.

While Mahan's lasting imprint on maritime strategic thought cannot be easily exaggerated, Julian Corbett's (1999) ideas are often valued as

a complementary element to a neo-Mahanian framework. Interestingly enough, Corbett's work could not find widespread popularity until the 1950s and 1960s, even though he was a contemporary of Mahan (Hattendorf & Jordand, 1989). Corbett agreed with much of Mahan's emphasis on the importance of sea power, but his contributions greatly helped to expand the universe of maritime strategy by revealing that complete sea dominance cannot be easily attained and, instead, successful maritime strategies stem from sea control in the first place. In ensuring sea control, sea powers concentrate their efforts on controlling the right to passage on the sea and sea lines of communications for both commercial and military purposes rather than simply seeking the destruction of the enemy fleet and full conquest. As such, Corbett draws attention to the crucial role of constabulary force and maneuver warfare focused on littoral regions and complementing heavy combat power with frigates, corvettes, and patrol craft. In Corbett's view, a conflict situation in which neither side prevails may also be relatively advantageous for a sea power given that the enemy can be denied sea control in such situations. In this process, moreover, economic power is essential. At the end of the day, the enemy's denial of sea control would undermine its trade revenues and overall economic strength, which would eventually lay the groundwork for the erosion of the enemy resistance and its military defeat (Corbett, 1999; Kraska, 2011; Kane, 2002; Hattendorf & Jordand, 1989). In light of Corbett's ideas, one could observe that both the South China Sea and Eastern Mediterranean conflicts have brought to the forefront the relevance of constabulary force and maneuver warfare as well as that of sea control and containment strategies.

Geographical Position and Conformation in the South China Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean

It is possible to assess China and Turkey's potential of maritime power based on a Corbett-inspired neo-Mahanian framework, as was depicted in the previous section. In terms of geographical position and conformation, both countries hold the advantage of access to open seas. For instance, Turkey has the longest coastlines (1577 km) in the Mediterranean Sea. Located in the Mediterranean, Mersin and İskenderun Ports are close to Turkey's economic centers and assume an important role in regional trade and energy traffic. This being said, the strategic importance of these ports can only be fully appreciated when taken in the larger context of East Mediterranean geopolitics. Firstly, the Mediterranean Sea represents a highly strategic intersection point between Asia, Africa, and Europe, which connects the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. Adding to this is the fact that the Mediterranean Sea provides the shortest route that connects the Far East to Europe and the Atlantic. As such, one could argue that the command of the Mediterranean is of extreme importance to control energy traffic and international migratory flows towards Europe (TESSAM, 2008; Çomak & Şeker, 2019). About 70% of European energy imports are transported through the Mediterranean Sea. In this region, the Eastern Mediterranean is strategically located to control migratory flows and energy traffic given its proximity to the Suez Canal.

In this respect, Cyprus Island assumes a strategic role in controlling not only the flow of international trade and energy traffic from the Caspian Basin, the Persian Gulf, and the Suez Canal but also any future military operation to be conducted in the entire region. For these reasons, it is not surprising to know that the South Cyprus government harbors the largest number

of military troops by surface area and the largest number of intelligence personnel by population size in the world. The South Cyprus government has become one of the most important bases of Britain and the US aiming to encircle Eurasian powers such as China, Russia, Iran, and Turkey (TESSAM, 2008; Çomak & Şeker, 2019). Several joint drills by Israel, the US, France, Greece, and South Cyprus such as Noble Dina, Nemesis, and Eunomia are aimed at not only containing Turkey, but also undermining China, Russia, and Iran.



Turkish seismic research vessel Oruç Reis will x-ray the Mediterranean (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources, 2020)

Particularly, US authorities have officially asserted their support for Greek energy policies at Turkey's expense and framed Turkey's Mediterranean demands as a "unilateral show of force" (Berberakis, 2020). US interventionism in the Mediterranean will likely take on an even greater weight if the Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act is passed by the full Senate and the House of Representatives thanks to bipartisan support. This act aims to improve cooperation between the US, Israel, Greece, and the South Cyprus government

as well as removing the ban on arms sales to the South Cyprus government, increasing US military assistance, and limiting US military cooperation with Turkey, if Turco-Russian rapprochement were to be further deepened (Litsas, 2020). Certainly, this partnership will be most detrimental to China's regional strategic interests in the longer term given that the Mediterranean is of vital importance to the continuation and development of MSR.

A stronger Turkey and Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus hold the potential to facilitate Eurasian access to the Mediterranean. However, the West has been devoting special efforts to locking Turkey's maritime zone to only a small area around Antalya Province despite Turkey having the longest coastlines in the Mediterranean Sea.

Considering the strategic location of Cyprus Island in the Mediterranean, the South Cyprus government and Western military elements dominating the island will also assume a key role in limiting the Mediterranean access of Eurasian powers such as China, Russia, and Iran. Inversely, a stronger Turkey and Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus hold the potential to facilitate Eurasian access to the Mediterranean. However, the West has been devoting special efforts to locking Turkey's maritime zone to only a small area around Antalya Province despite Turkey having the longest coastlines in the Mediterranean Sea. These malicious efforts are symbolized in the so-called "Seville Map", a European-made map that is often used as an official pretext by both the Greek and the South Cyprus governments. Eventually,

the successful implementation of the Seville Map would endanger Mediterranean stability alongside MSR's prospects given Turkey's dominant geographical location in the Mediterranean Sea. Furthermore, Turkey constitutes MSR's strongest partner from a geostrategic point of view. To the difference of Turkey, which has increasingly been adopting a more independent foreign-policy approach, pro-Western countries where China holds BRI-related investments, such as Greece and Israel (Litsas, 2020), are not likely to abandon the Western alliance in the long term.

The East Mediterranean's importance for Turkey is comparable to that of the South China Sea for China. The South China Sea is even larger than the Caribbean Sea and is considered one of the world's largest semi-enclosed seas. It is home to almost half of all global maritime trade. Similarly, half of global liquified gas traffic and one-third of global crude oil traffic passes through the South China Sea (Huang & Billo, 2015; Stavridis, 2018). 80 to 90% of China's oil imports are transported via the Malacca Strait and therefore pass through the South China Sea. Japan and South Korea's energy imports also assume similar levels of dependency on South China Sea traffic. Besides its importance for energy traffic, the South China Sea also possesses ample natural resources. Estimates suggest that this sea contains oil reserves of 17 billion tonnes and natural gas reserves of 14 trillion m³. About 10% of global fish catches come from the South China Sea. Besides these energy and trade-related features, the South China Sea's strategic importance for China also stems from its proximity to Chinese industrial centers and serves as a natural shield that protects China's demographically dense areas (Fels & Vu, 2016; Turcsányi, 2018; Bateman & Emmers, 2008; Hashmi, 2016). Fi-



The map of Blue Homeland is prepared by resigned RADM Cihat Yaycı. This map is shared here by the courtesy of Mr. Yaycı.

nally, BRI's maritime route starts from the city of Fuzhou, facing the Strait of Taiwan and opening up to the South China Sea, before leaving China for the Malacca Strait (Le, Tran & Duc, 2019).

China and Turkey's Territorial Size, Demographic Structure, and Maritime Policies Under the Threat of US Interventionism

As was discussed in the previous section, Turkey and China's geographical location and conformation offer potential advantages for improving maritime cooperation along MSR. However, this potential cannot be fully realized until certain conditions have been met. From a neo-Mahanian perspective, sea power also derives from demographic, territorial, and political-cultural factors conducive to economic dynamism and maritime expansion. In the case of Turkey, the Turkish economy has been going through a period of

marked decline since 2009, which would in turn constrain its maritime potential. Meanwhile, Turkey also inspires ample optimism about its maritime potential as one of the largest and most dynamic Middle Eastern economies. Furthermore, Turkey ranks third in the list of the largest Middle Eastern countries by surface area and those with the highest performance in human capital and innovation after Israel and the United Arab Emirates (World Bank, 2020: 27; Global Innovation Index, 2020: 16). Turkey's name is also mentioned among the world's top 10 ship-building countries including China, South Korea, and Japan, even though Turkey's position is fast regressing due to a combination of several factors including a general lack of public funding and excessive domination of the private sector in such a strategic industry as the ship-building industry (OECD, 2011). These factors speak to Turkey's maritime potential as a country surrounded by sea on three sides, regard-

less of its recently arising economic challenges. Certainly, Turkey cannot match China's potential as the world's largest country by population size, fourth-largest country by surface area, and second-largest economy. Though China is on par with Turkey when it comes to its performance in human capital, it ranks among the world's top 15 countries in the field of innovation. China's maritime potential can also be assessed based on the fact that it possesses the world's largest navy and third-largest diaspora (World Bank, 2020: 27; Global Innovation Index, 2020: 16; Lye, 2020).

In these conditions, China and Turkey's maritime efforts require even greater care and attention to non-geographical factors. For these countries to put their advantage of access to open seas into action in the fullest sense, they require greater cooperation faced with US interventionism.

To the difference of the United States and Britain, China and Turkey do not constitute insular powers, and their continental characteristics constrain their maritime potential. As was cautioned by Mahan himself, a continental connection comes with potential border security problems that lead non-insular power to divert their full attention from naval development (Mahan, 1999; Kane, 2002). In these conditions, China and Turkey's maritime efforts require even greater care and attention to non-geographical factors. For these countries to put their advantage of access to open seas into action in the fullest sense, they require greater cooperation faced with US interventionism. In this regard, the acceleration of Sino-Turkish co-

operation in the context of BRI inspires much optimism. Cheng Enfu and Li Jing (2020) remark that around 1,000 Chinese firms currently operate in Turkey and these firms have accelerated their economic activities thanks to the successful implementation of BRI. Moreover, they stress the importance of an agreement signed by Turkey and China during the 2017 BRI Forum, which is aimed at facilitating bilateral cooperation on international passenger and cargo transport (Cheng & Li, 2020). Worthy of note here is that Cheng and Li's (2020) own contributions to the debate reflect a favorable Chinese perspective into the complementarity of Eastern Mediterranean and South China Sea security as well as the potential impact of BRI in resolving maritime conflicts in these regions.

The deepening and durability of such empowering arrangements are contingent on the development of a strong political-cultural base, especially for Turkey. Certainly, China has inherited a strong maritime tradition since ancient times. In imperial times, moreover, China was able to pursue strong maritime policies under the rule of powerful emperors since the Han dynasty era (Kane, 2002). This being said, China's current successful efforts at improving its sea power also owes to external factors, which find their sharpest expression in rising US interventionism in Asia.

With Barack Obama's ascension to the presidency in 2009, the focus of US interventionism has shifted from the Middle East to Asia and the South China Sea within the framework of the "Pivot to Asia" strategy. This strategy was predicated on the idea of initiating a military buildup to contain China while isolating it from the region through a US-led free trade initiative

called Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). At this point, it is important to emphasize that rising US interventionism also triggered the acceleration of tensions as part of the South China Sea conflict involving China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Brunei. In the meantime, Obama declared himself as the first “Pacific President” and made frequent visits to East Asia. In her speech at the 2010 Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum, Hillary Clinton, who was U.S. secretary of state at the time, asserted that South China sea stability is part of US national interests. In the Obama era, moreover, numerous official foreign policy documents revealed US interventionist intentions (Litsas, 2020; Wu, 2013; Fels & Vu, 2016; Turcsányi, 2018). In reaction to rising US interventionism, China thus decided to accelerate its

efforts at expanding its naval power and building artificial islands in the South China sea in 2013 for defensive purposes. China’s defensive reaction to US intentions of forced containment and isolation reflected a constant desire for peaceful cooperation on the economic front, which finds its strongest expression in the implementation of BRI. One could therefore deduce that China’s current position consists of improving South China Sea security to advance its agenda of improving peaceful economic cooperation in response to rising US aggression.

From a neo-Mahanian perspective, the common threat of US aggression shared by China and Turkey has resulted in the development of similar geostrategic doctrines. Faced with rising US interventionism under the Obama administration, China adopted the doctrine of



the “national blue soil” (蓝色国土 *lanse guotu*), which is represented by the “nine-dash line” map on China’s maritime zone in the South China sea (Richardson, 2015). This doctrine claims Paracel, Spratly, and Pratas Islands as well as Macclesfield Bank and Scarborough Shoal as part of China’s homeland. The “national blue soil” found initial mention in the 2010 Ocean Development Report prepared by the State Oceanic Administration, which also included China’s official statement on the development of a carrier fleet (Cheng, 2013; Fels & Vu, 2016; Lanteigne, 2016).

The “Blue Homeland” doctrine was put into effect following a pro-US failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016, as a result of which Turkey decided to delink from the Greater Middle East Project and adopt a more independent foreign policy approach.

To the difference of China, Turkey has inherited a weak maritime legacy. As Cem Gürdeniz, a retired Turkish admiral, argues, both the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey were shut off from maritime civilization due to domestic policy failures and external pressures, which explains the current state of Turkey’s maritime power (Gürdeniz, 2020). Worthy of note in this regard is that Turkey’s maritime trade fleet globally regressed from the 18th to the 22nd rank in the period 2000-2012 (Kanat, 2016). This being said, Turkey’s “Blue Homeland” doctrine presents a new homeland imaginary whose reach extends to its inland waters, continental shelves, and exclusive economic zones.

The “Blue Homeland” doctrine was put into effect following a pro-US failed coup attempt on

July 15, 2016, as a result of which Turkey decided to delink from the Greater Middle East Project and adopt a more independent foreign policy approach. In the pre-coup era, pro-US elements had infiltrated into the Turkish bureaucratic and political apparatus and used their influence to launch “witch-hunt” trials based on fabricated evidence such as Ergenekon and Sledgehammer, which led to the imprisonment of high-ranking military officials, politicians, and intellectuals with anti-imperialist and anti-US leanings. These trials also helped to paralyze the Turkish military and the navy command structure, which was the key target of the 2010 Sledgehammer operation. Interestingly enough, the timing of this trial targeting the Turkish navy coincided with the discovery of natural gas resources in the Eastern Mediterranean before the Syrian conflict in 2011 (Gürcan, 2019). However, Turkey’s navy took a great leap forward following the adoption of the “Blue Homeland” doctrine, which led to a massive mobilization campaign for national warship and submarine construction. Such drills as Blue Homeland and Determination demonstrated the increasing deterrent potential of the Turkish navy in the period 2016-2020. This adds to the signing of a Turkish-Libyan maritime boundary deal in 2019, which dealt a heavy blow to Western interventionism symbolized by the Seville Map. It is important to know that this agreement determines the southwestern end of the Blue Homeland (İşeri & Bartan, 2019; Akfırat, 2019; Aydınlik, 2019). In the final analysis, one could argue that Turkey’s pro-Western foreign policy in the pre-2016 era – which supported the Anan plan for the de-militarization of the Turkish side of Cyprus Island and land concessions – has

left its place to a more responsible foreign-policy attitude that reclaims North Cyprus sovereignty and the Turkish maritime zones.

Conclusion

Initiated at China's initiative in 2013, BRI has emerged as a strong force amidst the crisis of US-led hegemonic governance and the deepening of global economic and military chaos. However, BRI's real potential cannot be realized without maritime security along MSR. Turkey and China appear as key actors in ensuring maritime security, whose mutual ties are increasingly being consolidated in the context of rising multipolarity. The present article has examined the consolidation of these objective ties from a neo-Mahanian perspective. This analysis reveals that maritime security in the South China Sea –as MSR's starting point– and in the East Mediterranean –as MSR's final destination until it reaches Europe– are mutually conditioned and contingent on each other for the development and prospects of BRI. Both countries constitute the key players in their respective maritime regions connected through BRI and therefore have a vested interest in providing mutual support for enhancing maritime security. Certainly, Turkey assumes a critical role as part of MSR given its status as a Mediterranean country that has the longest coastlines and possesses strong demographic and economic dynamism in its vast territory. In the meantime, both Turkey and China suffer from increasing US interventionism at first hand. In the Mediterranean case, US interventionism is further consolidated through a stronger pro-Western alliance that includes Israel, France, Greece and the South Cyprus government. This is an important risk factor

that threatens to contain the peaceful development of China in the longer term. Under these conditions, one could observe that China and Turkey have developed similar geostrategic doctrines embodied in the Turkish “Blue Homeland” doctrine and the Chinese “Blue National Soil” doctrine. China and Turkey's shared geopolitical imperatives and geostrategic conformity are to be better grasped by policy-makers for the future success of BRI.

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