

# **SINOMETER- *The China Strategic Monitor***

October 2023

Volume 21

**CS3**

**CENTRE FOR STRATEGIC  
STUDIES AND SIMULATION**



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## Sinometer for the Month of October 2023

### China's Stand on Israel – Hamas Conflict: The Dilemma

By Col Vijay Goyat

The Israel – Hamas conflict, now in its third week has brought out an interesting facet of China's foreign relations. This war is slowly threatening China's ambitions of being a key role player in the Middle East. China is doing a challenging balancing act and, in the process, alienating Israel as it gives priority to its energy security. China has interests on both sides of the conflict. It has long advocated for a two-state solution and even armed the Palestinian Liberation Organization in the 1960s and 1970s. Yet today, Beijing is also Israel's second-largest trading partner.<sup>1</sup> China has played a key role in the Arab region in the recent past. It was the key mediator between Iran and Saudi Arabia peace deal resulting in a normalization of relations between the two Arab giants after almost seven years. Basking in its successes, China also offered to mediate between Israel and Palestine and hoped to fill a void. It hosted the leadership of both Palestine and Israel in May this year on separate occasions and China would have discussed several aspects including a peace deal. China has strong economic interests in the region and those would be affected if the current war draws in other players. It imports a substantial amount of energy from Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran. Trade figures are also high at \$259bn in 2021 for the Middle East and North Africa – three times the volume of US trade with the region. China's trade with Israel stood at \$18bn in 2021. While calling for calm and an end to hostilities, China has reiterated that the only long-term solution to the conflict is the creation of an independent Palestinian state. Since then, its official comments have been largely the same, with diplomat Zhai Jun calling for an "immediate ceasefire and an end to the fighting as quickly as possible" at the Cairo Peace Summit in October 2023.<sup>2</sup>

China may also plan to exploit its close relations with Iran to influence any future peace deal in a bid to raise its profile at a global level and be seen as a peace angel while sympathizing with the Palestinian cause – a la playing to the gallery for the global South. China Daily, a state-run newspaper, ran an editorial declaring that the United States was on the "wrong side of history in Gaza." It said Washington was exacerbating the conflict by "blindly backing Israel."<sup>3</sup> In Oct 2023, a few Chinese websites even published maps of the region without showing Israel, and China was quick to issue a rebuttal. Thus, China is at a crossroads. It has a domestic audience, which is not pro-Israel, and this is reflected in why China did not condemn Hamas' action of 07 Oct. It has business interests in Israel and has ties to Iran. It has energy security concerns and to top it all, global ambitions. China will watch this conflict closely as it tries to replace the US as a key player in this region.

## Philippines Highlighting Chinese Grey Zone Warfare Strategies in the South China Sea

By Manav Saini

The relationship between Manila and Beijing has been on a downfall due to two naval collisions in the South China Sea. On October 22, 2023, a Chinese militia vessel hit a Philippines Coast Guard ship when the Philippines Coast Guard was going for a resupply at the Philippines military station on the Second Thomas Shoal.<sup>4</sup> The video has been circulated of the collision in the Philippines media. China claims the Second Thomas Shoal Island as part of its territory in the Spratly Islands. No person was injured during the collision.<sup>5</sup>

The dispute and collisions in the Spratly Islands are not new between the Philippines and China. However, the relationship between the Philippines and China was completely different in January 2023 when Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. praised the friendship between the both nations during in visit in January 2023.<sup>6</sup>



There has been an interesting shift in the foreign policies of President Ferdinand Marcos with regard to China after January 2023. The collisions in the sea are getting media coverage and glare in the Philippines, in fact, this is not the first time that a Philippines journalist has recorded a video of the collision in the Spratly Islands.<sup>7</sup> The Philippines has been actively publicising the Chinese actions in the waters near to Philippines in its media as well as globally. The Philippines began sending more videos of the counters to local media in January 2023.<sup>8</sup> By mid-2023, the Philippines was transporting an increasing number of journalists, including BBC journalists, on its boats and aircraft to the disputed waters to highlight the instability in the South China Sea.<sup>9</sup>

The Philippines is trying to highlight the Chinese Grey zone warfare activities, said Col Powell.<sup>10</sup> The Philippines claimed China for directing a military laser toward a Philippine coast guard ship in March 2023.<sup>11</sup> The Chinese coast guard used water cannons at a Philippine vessel in August 2023.<sup>12</sup> In addition, China constructed a floating barrier in early October 2023 to restrict the Philippines' access to the Second Thomas Shoal.<sup>13</sup> The Philippines eliminated the obstruction. Both of the nation's ships are now clashing in contested seas. Analyst such as Oriana Skylar Mastro says that the strategy has been helpful for a while to the Philippines in reducing the Chinese activities in the South China Sea against the Philippines while the Chinese. He says "*We saw a bit of a lull in China's activities.*"<sup>14</sup>

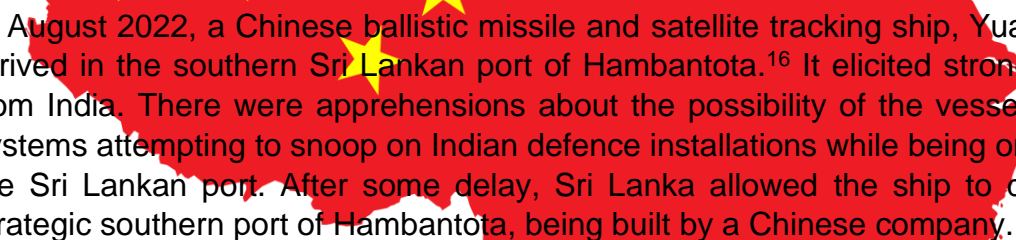
The dispute and territorial claims in the South China Sea are unlikely to end in the future. Moreover, with the ups and downs in the trajectory of activities by China in the future, it is highly unlikely that China will stop similar activities of collision in the future. Collective military power against China and its claim is the only possible means to stop China from gaining full control over the islands in the South China Sea. Southeast Asian nations understand this, which is why ASEAN started its non-combat drills named the ASEAN Solidarity Exercise in September 2023 in the South China Sea to show its collective power.<sup>15</sup> It signals China that the South China Sea doesn't only belong to China.





## Increasing Trend of Chinese Ships Docking in Colombo: Implications for India

By Col Vijay Goyat



In August 2022, a Chinese ballistic missile and satellite tracking ship, Yuan Wang 5, arrived in the southern Sri Lankan port of Hambantota.<sup>16</sup> It elicited strong reactions from India. There were apprehensions about the possibility of the vessel's tracking systems attempting to snoop on Indian defence installations while being on its way to the Sri Lankan port. After some delay, Sri Lanka allowed the ship to dock at the strategic southern port of Hambantota, being built by a Chinese company.

In August 2023, Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy warship Hai Yang 24 Hao arrived in Sri Lanka on a two-day visit.<sup>17</sup> Again, the arrival of the 129-metre-long ship was delayed due to concerns raised by India.

In October 2023, another Chinese research ship docked at Sri Lanka's Colombo port amid security concerns raised by the US over its visit.<sup>18</sup> The Ship Shi Yan 6 reportedly docked for replenishment without any clear timelines being available for its further movement. Described as a research/survey vessel, the ship is slated for marine research activities in collaboration with Sri Lanka's National Aquatic Resource Research and Development Agency (NARA). It has a carrying capacity of 1,115 DWT, with an overall 90.6 metres in length and a width of 17 metres.<sup>19</sup>

The US Under Secretary Victoria Nuland, had reportedly raised concerns about the visit of Shi Yan 6.

## Implications

Beijing is using its vessels such as Shi Yan 6, a dual-purpose vessel, not only for maritime survey but also for seabed survey for future operations of the Chinese Navy in the Indian Ocean. For the past decade, China has been exploring the Indian Ocean as part of its strategy to expand its footprint in the region. It is apparently carrying out sea-bed research to ensure that sea lanes are created for future expansion of the Chinese Navy and is likely to use this data in various eventualities in the Indian Ocean, which may be detrimental to India.<sup>20</sup>

Being a vessel of technical and survey in nature, and not necessarily a warship, India can take limited action against the ship

Such repeated actions by the Chinese navy and the permissions granted by Colombo highlight that Sri Lanka is in no position to refuse the PLAN any of the docking and replenishment facilities due to the debt trap it has landed itself in. It is imperative for India to look at ways and means for rescuing Sri Lanka from this debt trap and retaining a strategic ally in a vital geographical location in the Indian Ocean.



**Columbia, A Long-Time US Ally, Swings Towards China**

By Nandini Agarwal



China and Colombia on October 25th elevated their relations to a strategic partnership, as Chinese President Xi Jinping held talks with Colombian President Gustavo Francisco Petro

Urrego, who is on a state visit to China, in Beijing.<sup>21</sup> The two countries strengthened their 1980-established diplomatic relations when President Gustavo Petro of Colombia visited Beijing and met with his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping. Since assuming office a year ago, this visit was President Petro's first to the second-largest economy in the world.<sup>22</sup> With the improvement of relations with Colombia, China now has strategic partnerships with ten of the eleven South American countries with which it maintains diplomatic relations. Guyana is the region's only country with whom it has regular bilateral relations. In recent years, China has increased its diplomatic efforts in South America, Central America, and the Caribbean, all of which are strategically important in the context of its rivalry with the United States.

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, China took the initiative to give the first batch of vaccines to Colombia. As a token of appreciation for China's support in combating the coronavirus, Xi Jinping was invited to deliver an address to the people of Colombia via video link in 2021.<sup>23</sup>

Chinese imports from Colombia have increased significantly in recent years, making China the South American country's second-largest economic partner after the United States. Colombian exports to China totalled \$7 billion in 2022, representing a nearly 20% growth over the previous five years.<sup>24</sup>

“We (China and Columbia) have become good friends and partners for win-win cooperation and common development,” Xi told Petro, according to Chinese state broadcaster CCTV.<sup>25</sup> Petro expressed that the improved relations with Beijing serve as an example of “the good relationship that Colombia has to build around an increasingly multipolar world”.<sup>26</sup>



Gaining a presence in Colombia, a staunch US ally in the heart of the American continent with access to the Caribbean and Pacific, is particularly appealing to Beijing. “It would help with the distribution of products and technology services, among other Chinese interests,” said Parsifal D’Sola, executive director of the Andres Bello Foundation, a think-tank working on Chinese-Latin American relations.<sup>27</sup> “And given Colombia’s historical ties to the US, it would be a diplomatic win for China”.<sup>28</sup>

During President Petro's visit, both countries signed 12 cooperation agreements which encompass a variety of sectors of engagement.<sup>29</sup> One of them lays the way for Colombian beef imports to China, which are set to commence next year. Another agreement allows for the exchange of quinoa between the two countries. They also formed various working groups with the aim of strengthening trade relations.<sup>30</sup>

Nonetheless, President Petro emphasised the importance of China increasing its imports from South America to address the trade deficit, despite loans, investments, and infrastructure projects. Colombia, in particular, has been grappling with a substantial trade deficit with China, exceeding \$8 billion in 2022, making it the South American nation with the largest trade deficit in its relations with China.<sup>31</sup>

Conclusively, China's decision to elevate diplomatic relations with Colombia to a strategic partnership demonstrates the country's continuous commitment to expanding its presence and influence in Latin America, a region of vital strategic importance. Even though the economic links between the two nations have become stronger, the trade deficit remains a significant concern that both sides are ready to address through increasing cooperation and collaboration.



## Key Takeaways from the Belt and Road Forum III

By Manav Saini



The Belt and Road Forum (BRF) III in Beijing occurred on October 18, 2023. The Forum focused on the theme, 'High-quality Belt and Road Cooperation: Together for Common Development and Prosperity.' Representatives from 150 countries attended the forum including President Vladimir Putin of the Russian Federation.<sup>32</sup> Three high-level forums on the subjects of the Green Silk Road for Nature Harmony, Connectivity in an Open World Economy, and Digital Economy as a New Source of Growth were organised.<sup>33</sup>

During the opening remarks by Xi Jinping, he convened the success and future goals of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The major takeaways from the 2023 BRF include enhancing maritime cooperation, encouraging a Clean Silk Road, promoting unhindered trade, strengthening think tank exchanges, enhancing people-to-people interactions, and strengthening subnational cooperation.<sup>34</sup> The following major steps will be taken by China to approach its BRI. It includes expanding economic cooperation through (a) pilot e-commerce zones and free trade agreements, (b) increasing financial support for BRI projects, particularly in the form of financing windows and cooperation agreements, (c) promoting green and sustainable development, advancing scientific and technological innovation, (d) fostering people-to-people exchanges through cultural initiatives, (e) promoting integrity and compliance in BRI cooperation, and (f) strengthening institutional frameworks for international collaboration within the BRI.<sup>35</sup> The Chair's statement of BRF III emphasised the delivery of various international cooperation initiatives, conferences, and cooperation projects. It reflects China's commitment to BRI and advancing its global connectivity and infrastructure development agenda.



Apart from this, China will emphasise creating a multi-layered Belt and Road connection network- China will accelerate the high-quality development of the China-Europe Railway Express that will join the trans-Caspian international transportation corridor.<sup>36</sup> China will also host the China-Europe Railway Express Cooperation Forum, and collaborate to build a new logistics corridor across the Eurasian continent linked by direct railway and road transportation.<sup>37</sup> Under the "Silk Road Maritime Cooperation," China will cogently integrate ports, shipping, and trade services, as well as expedite the construction of the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor and the Air Silk Road.<sup>38</sup> China is focusing on connectivity with Europe, which is seen as a major Geopolitical motive by China to influence its interest and trade in Europe. It may help in countering the US influence in Europe. Therefore, India and the US need to work together to increase connectivity and trade with Europe.



## Chinese FM Wang Yi Meets with Joe Biden during his visit to the US

By Manav Saini



On Oct 27, 2023, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met US President Joe Biden in the White House. Wang Yi's visit to the US is seen as an effort to stabilise US-China relations and stop them from further de-escalation. Wang Yi emphasised win-win cooperation between the US and China. The visit by Wang Yi also indicates and increases the probability of a meeting between Joe Biden and Xi Jinping on the sidelines of an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum

summit, which will occur in November 2023.<sup>39</sup>

According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, Wang Yi told Joe Biden that it is crucial to facilitate the stabilisation and recovery of China-US relations and ensure that the two countries swiftly return to a healthy and stable development track.<sup>40</sup> The goal of this visit was to communicate with the US, effectively, implement the Bali consensus, and look forward to Xi Jinping and Joe Biden meeting in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum in San Francisco in November 2023.<sup>41</sup>

Yi emphasised on One-China principle and the three China-US joint communiques being the most important pillars of the US-China bilateral relations and indicated the US to adhere to these pillars to avoid worsening its relations with China.<sup>42</sup> Wang Yi also mentioned joint cooperation with the US in addressing the Global Challenges.<sup>43</sup> The relations between both nations deteriorated when the US shot down an allegedly Chinese spy balloon in its airspace earlier this year.

In-depth talks on the Middle East and Ukrainian crises were also covered in the meeting, as well as the relationship between the Chinese and American military, finance, science, and technology, as well as China's investment climate and market access were also discussed.<sup>44</sup> The meeting between Joe Biden and Xi Jinping can be seen as an escalation management talks/meeting, where both nations do not go into an indirect conflict or small clashes.





## Chinese Defence Minister Li Shangfu Sacked

By Manav Saini



China has officially removed its Defence Minister Li Shangfu from its post, after President Xi Jinping signed a presidential decree on Oct 24, 2023.<sup>45</sup> No explanation has been given by the Chinese government for his removal from the post of Defence Minister. Qin Gang was also removed from his post of Foreign Minister in July 2023, without stating the reason. The removal of both persons was approved by China's top legislators, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress.<sup>46</sup> Both of them were said to be the favourites of Xi Jinping. According to Reuters, it is speculated that Li Shangfu was under investigation for suspected corruption linked to equipment procurement and development.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, Qin Gang allegedly had an extramarital affair. Li Shangfu was seen in public around 2 months back on August 29, 2023, at a Beijing security forum with African nations. He had only been in the post since March 2023.<sup>48</sup>

Gen Li is an aerospace engineer, he ascended through the ranks of the Chinese political elite and military with ease.<sup>49</sup> He started his career at a satellite and rocket launch centre. As the chief of the military's equipment development branch in 2018, he faced sanctions from the US government due to China's acquisition of Russian combat aircraft and weaponry.<sup>50</sup> However, it was believed that the penalties were a source of contention for General Li since he declined to attend a defence meeting in Singapore earlier this year with his US colleague Lloyd Austin.<sup>51</sup> The removal of the defence minister without any reason shows the opaqueness within the Chinese Communist Party. Moreover, the position of defence minister remained vacant after he was sacked.





## China Reaps Success in Global Space Collaborations

By Nandini Agarwal



Through in-depth space cooperation, China, along with many other countries around the world, has established a vast and impressive 'space silk road', which has played an important role in advancing the exploration and utilization of space resources and promoting the development of human civilization.<sup>52</sup> The

constellation of the Beidou Navigation Satellite System (BDS) is constantly active in space. Since its inception more than three years ago, the BDS has diversified its application models, with its fields of use gradually expanding.<sup>53</sup> According to statistics, the BDS-3 has provided accelerated positioning and high-precision service to more than 1.5 billion users in more than 230 countries and regions, winning more and more recognition from the international community.<sup>54</sup>

According to Chen Gucang, deputy director of the China Satellite Navigation Office, the BDS has applications in a wide range of industries. It was instrumental in the construction of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan highway and has contributed to the operation of the China-Kazakhstan crude oil pipeline and the China-Europe freight trains.<sup>55</sup>

China's foray into the cosmos commenced with astronaut Yang Liwei's momentous journey in 2003, signifying the nation's ascent as a formidable player in the realm of space exploration.<sup>56</sup> Moving ahead two decades, China has firmly established itself as a key participant in the space sector, demonstrating its economic, political, and military impact on Earth. China has made significant advances in space exploration through the building of its permanent space station and frequent crew rotations.

China began a series of lunar missions in 2007, including orbiters, landers, rovers, and sample-return spacecraft, indicating a considerable commitment to lunar exploration.<sup>57</sup>

The principles guiding China's lunar exploration effort are "equality, mutual benefit, peaceful use, and win-win cooperation."<sup>58</sup> It is inclusive and accessible to the entire world. The China National Space Administration (CNSA) cordially invites states and international entities to work at all levels, including missions, systems, and units, to

collaboratively create revolutionary scientific advances and contribute to the construction of a shared future for all humanity.<sup>59</sup>

China's lunar exploration program has opened opportunities for international cooperation on Chang'e-8 to the international community. It welcomes countries and international organizations to join and carry out multilevel collaboration together to achieve more major original scientific discoveries.<sup>60</sup>

While NASA investigates numerous prospects, including collaborating with private companies to develop commercial space stations, China's growing presence in the space sector emerges as a considerable factor. Several other countries have begun talks with China, recognizing the potential for collaboration in the field of space exploration.

China's space exploration is not only a tribute to its scientific and technological advancement but also an emblem of its hopes for a better future. China's aerospace sector is primed for further expansion, with a new generation of astronauts carrying the torch, promising exciting breakthroughs and groundbreaking achievements in the future.



## US Deploys Drone Ships In Japan As Part Of Deterrence Strategy Against Beijing

By Nandini Agarwal



The US sent two multi-role unmanned surface vessels (USVs) to its naval sites in Japan, which some defence experts believe could be a signal of prospective plans to incorporate drone ships into its deterrence strategy against Beijing over Taiwan.<sup>61</sup> According to a statement issued by the US Seventh Fleet, the vessels named Mariner and Ranger from the US Third Fleet travelled from

California to Yokosuka, Japan, last month as an integral component of the US Navy's exercise known as Integrated Battle Problem 23.2 (IBP23.2).<sup>62</sup> The IBP23.2 is an exercise focused on testing the use of USVs together with manned vessels in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>63</sup>

The Ranger was escorted by the Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Shoup during its transpacific voyage, according to the US Seventh Fleet.<sup>64</sup> This marked the inaugural occasion when the US Navy deployed unmanned ships for covering such an extensive distance and signals a shift in the usage of drone ships in naval combat paving the way for their increased usage in the near future.

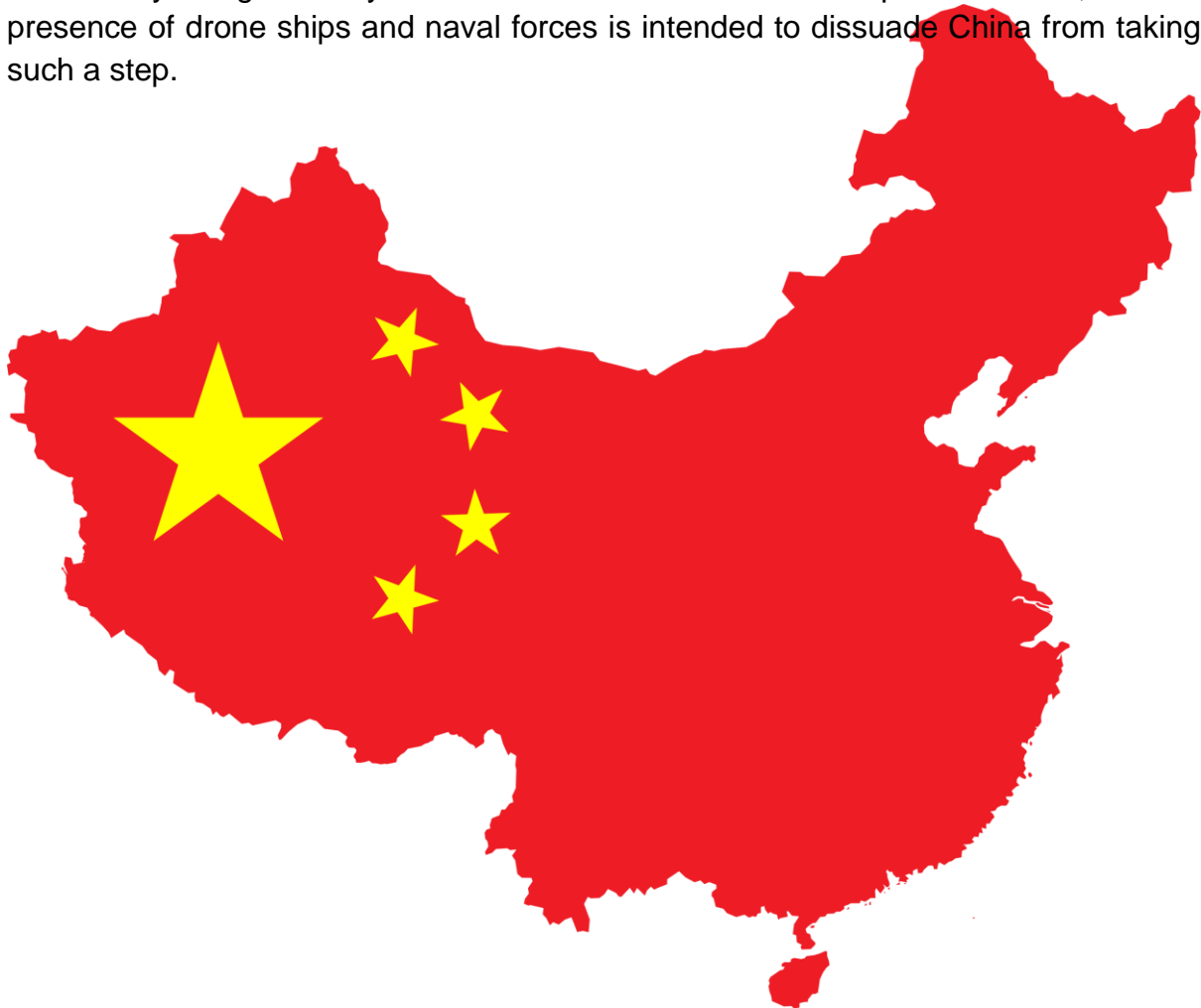
Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), commonly known as aerial drones, experienced a similar evolutionary period before becoming vital components of modern warfare. In a more recent context, the utilization of aerial drones played a pivotal role in countering Russian aggression in Ukraine.

When compared to airborne drones deployed more than two decades ago, technological advances have enabled USVs to operate with a higher degree of autonomy. As the United States Navy gears up for the future, it recognises China's superior shipbuilding capabilities, which have enabled China to stockpile 425 active warships as of August of this year.<sup>65</sup> In response to this Chinese threat, the United States is investigating the deployment of USVs to augment its maritime presence.<sup>66</sup>

According to the Rand Corporation, the US continues to have the world's most powerful navy, with a combined tonnage of around 4.6 million tonnes. But it has only around 280 warships, compared with China's 425 active warships as of August 2023,

which the Pentagon expects to increase to 440 by 2030.<sup>67</sup> Scott Savitz, a military expert at the Rand Corporation, said Taiwan should work with the US to launch swarms of explosive USVs to deter Beijing from attacking the self-ruled island.<sup>68</sup>

Experts perceive the US decision to station drone ships in the area as a strategic move aimed at preventing China from taking aggressive moves against Taiwan. China has publicly asserted that the self-governing island is an intrinsic part of its territory, and it is willing to use its military capabilities to assert control over it if required. Western nations do not recognise Taiwan as an independent country, but they are opposed to the territory being taken by force and intend to defend it if it requires defence, and the presence of drone ships and naval forces is intended to dissuade China from taking such a step.



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