

Influence of the *Thirty-Six Stratagems* on Chinese Strategy in the Diaoyu Islands

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Abstract

The Diaoyu Islands are a small, uninhabited archipelago in the East China Sea which has begun increasing in strategic significance due to its advantageous location near Taiwan and along the First Island Chain. The islands are currently under Japanese administration, but the People's Republic of China considers them historically Chinese and contests Japan's claim to the islands. A careful examination of China's actions in challenging Japan's rule over the Diaoyus reveals the influence of the *Thirty-Six Stratagems*, a tome of ancient Chinese military wisdom which provides a framework onto which China's current strategy corresponds. This thesis examines the historical and cultural influence of the *Thirty-Six Stratagems* and maps the wisdom onto China's actions in the Diaoyus. Thus, projection of future strategy and deterring actions can be developed to discourage Chinese belligerence in the East China Sea.

Influence of the *Thirty-Six Stratagems* on Chinese Strategy in the Diaoyu Islands

The use of force has been a feature of international relations since its conception, as conflict is fundamental to the human condition. As such, many different theories on force and war have been developed and endure to this day. The West will immediately name its own— Clausewitz’s *On War*, or Beaufre’s *Strategy for Tomorrow*. The West’s imagination portrays military might as an extension of politics and governmental will, and thus relegates the influences of military strategy to this arena. There is, however, another work of strategy perhaps more influential than those previously mentioned, because of its suffusion into the mentality of the society which spawned it. The *Thirty-Six Stratagems*, a collection of strategy wisdom compiled during the 16th century, can be found influencing every aspect of Chinese life— imagine indoctrinated military strategy with the ubiquity of “Mary Had a Little Lamb”.¹ The wisdom writings particularly influence China’s encompassing approach to the Diaoyu Islands, an uninhabited archipelago contested by China, Japan, and Taiwan. The stratagems are foundational to both of China’s views of the islands— as a boon to its own ambitions and a threatening advantage to adversaries.

The *Thirty-Six Stratagems* in Perspective

Though not as widely known in Western society as the *Art of War*, the *Thirty-Six Stratagems* are no less influential. While they are ostensibly a collection of military wisdom from the Warring States era, they are more analogous to nursery rhymes or folklore in terms of their influence. They embody and teach the values of their respective culture, and are ingrained

¹ Harro Von Senger, *36 Stratagems for Business*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish International (Asia) Private Limited, 2007. Accessed January 5, 2022. ProQuest Ebook Central. p. 3.

into the collective unconscious.² Furthermore, each is written using only four characters— a device designed to make them short and easily memorable.³ It is unknown exactly how the modern form of the *Thirty-Six Stratagems* came about, but it is thought to be a collected and edited compilation of wise sayings and stories from the Warring States period— approximately 481 BC to 221 BC. Some of the stratagems originate from folk tales of military conquests or blunders, such as “Besiege Wei to Rescue Zhao” derived from a campaign in 354 BC.⁴ Others appear fully formed, such as “Await an Exhausted Enemy at One’s Ease” which can be traced back to Sun Tzu.⁵

The word ‘stratagem’ is easily confused with ‘strategy’ especially in the context of these thirty-six. While they are similar, a strategy refers to an overarching approach to an issue, usually planned out in advance. Stratagem, on the other hand, refers to a trick or deception used; a departure from expected behavior to achieve one’s ends. This is a foreign concept to Westerners, as cunning, deceit, and tricks all have negative connotations. Not so for Eastern cultures, and especially not the *Thirty-Six Stratagems*. Herro von Senger, a Swiss Sinologist, helps dispel the unfavorable perception of trickery. He observes, “knowledge of stratagem is therefore the rationally structured ability to deviate from the routine, oriented toward problem-solving and based on cunning.”⁶

² Laurence J. Brahm, *Negotiating in China: 36 Strategies* (Hong Kong: NAGA Group, 1996), p. xii.

³ Harro Von Senger, *36 Strategems for Business*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish International (Asia) Private Limited, 2007. Accessed January 5, 2022. ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁴ Stefan Verstappen, *The Thirty-Six Strategies of Ancient China*. San Francisco, CA: China Books, 1999. p. 9.

⁵ Senger, *36 Strategems for Business*. p. 24.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

As such, the *Thirty-Six Stratagems* are best used when conventional strategy is inadequate, necessitating a different approach. These ruses work well against the West, due to the previously mentioned aversion to craftiness. As the West's own military strategist, Carl von Clausewitz, writes, "The weaker the powers of the strategic leader become, the more open he will be to cunning, so that cunning presents itself as a last resort to the very weak and small, for whom caution and wisdom no longer suffice, to the point where all skill appears to have deserted him."⁷ Clausewitz's opinion of cunning is not the well-thought-out trickery of the *Thirty-Six Stratagems*, but of an instinctual amateur. This is consistent with Clausewitz's overall theory of warfare. He views battle as something to be approached with overwhelming might, ended quickly and decisively. The adage, "the Chinese emphasize stratagems, Westerners emphasize force," is largely true throughout Western thought and strategy, thus American susceptibility to the *Thirty-Six Stratagems*.⁸

This asymmetry is how the stratagems are designed—and as previously mentioned, these artifices are fundamental to Chinese thought, and individuals brought up in this culture have the *Thirty-Six Stratagems* ingrained. The stratagems are not limited to strictly warfare; applications can range from business, politics, and everyday life. They form a common language of cunning as well— "Extreme sensitivity to cunning, characteristic of much of the Chinese population...acts like a protective shield. In nine out of ten cases, the suspicion of a trick might prove unfounded, but in the tenth case it might protect the subject from harm."⁹ While protective,

⁷ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1918), p. 8.

⁸ Senger, *36 Stratagems for Business*, p. 14.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

this mindset also fosters heuristical mirror-imaging— as China expects such cunning, they perceive it in all others, especially from foreigners. For example, a book was published in China examining the business strategy of Cisco, the Californian computer company, in light of the stratagems.¹⁰ Von Senger argues this is evidence of a “cognitive analytical web that the Chinese cast over reality— be it Chinese or foreign— in order to...interpret it from a stratagemic point of view.”¹¹

Thus, it is no surprise to see glimpses of these foundational webs in the grand strategy of the Chinese Communist Party. Although the *Thirty-Six Stratagems* are thought to have originated as an oral tradition, a written version by an unknown author was discovered in 1941 in the Shaanxi province.¹² It was then printed and widely circulated by a local publisher, simultaneous with the growth of the Chinese Communist Party in influence and power.¹³ It is no surprise, then, to find these stratagems have been and continue to be influential to a prominent section of the Party. Michael Pillsbury refers to this segment as the *ying pai*— nationalist generals, strategists, and politicians.¹⁴ He asserts that “internal Chinese government planning documents [show] how the Chinese explicitly use the ancient axioms” in formulating grand strategy.¹⁵ It should be no

¹⁰ Yi Mou, “*Ba Sike yu ‘sanshiliu ji’ yiqi chao*” [“Cisco and ‘the 36 stratagems’ brought together”], QXS , no. 2, 2004.

¹¹ Senger, *36 Stratagems for Business*, p. 31.

¹² Raluca Enescu, “The Thirty-Six Stratagems, with Examples from across History,” Medium (History of Yesterday, August 2, 2021), <https://historyofyesterday.com/the-thirty-six-stratagems-with-examples-from-across-history-a16c25ee4814>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Michael Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower* (Griffin, 2016), p. 33.

¹⁵ Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon*, p. 33.

surprise, then, that China examines the Diaoyu Islands through this lens, and seeks to leverage the situation in their favor.

Diaoyu or Senkaku?

The Diaoyus islands are contested by the People's Republic of China, the Republic of China, and Japan. As such, the archipelago has three names—they are referred to as 尖閣 (*Senkaku*) in Japanese, 钓鱼 (*Diaoyus*) by the PRC, and 釣魚臺 (*Diaoyutai*) by the ROC. As there is not international legal consensus on which nation the territory belongs to, there is not an internationally accepted name. It is acknowledged by the U.S. that the islands are under Japanese control in Article 5 of the U.S. Japan Security Treaty, and furthermore they are administered by the Japanese Government.¹⁶ However, this thesis is focused on China's conception of the islands, and as such will refer to them as the Diaoyus.

Additionally, it is also acknowledged that the Republic of China lays claim to the islands. However, the People's Republic of China considers Taiwan a province under their jurisdiction and does not recognize their authority. Again, as this thesis is focused on the PRC's view of the Diaoyus, it will not deeply examine Taiwan's claims to the islands.

The Diaoyus in Context of the First Island Chain

The Diaoyus are a small part of a much larger grouping of islands in the Pacific, thus its strategic location must be considered in context of the broader First Island Chain. This moniker refers to one of two archipelagoes of islands in the Western Pacific (See Figure One). Although the islands included under the umbrella of the First Island Chain can vary, it is generally thought

¹⁶ Bert Chapman, "Geopolitical Implications of the Sino-Japanese East China Sea Dispute for the U.S.," *Geopolitics, History, and International Relations* 9, no. 2 (2017): p. 15, <https://doi.org/10.22381/ghir9220172>, p. 19.

to consist of the Japanese home islands, Japan's Ryukyu chain, Taiwan, the islands of the South China Sea, and the Philippines.¹⁷ This group sweeps along the coastline of mainland Asia and is primarily a strategic conception, applicable when one nation or alliance has control of the entire chain. Militarily, the islands function as immobile, unsinkable aircraft carriers and can be used to enforce efficient blockades— due to its proximity to the mainland, it enables control of naval traffic to and from East Asia.

¹⁷ Toshi Yoshihara, "China's Vision of Its Seascapes: The First Island Chain and Chinese Seapower," *Asian Politics & Policy* 4, no. 3 (2012): pp. 293-314, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1943-0787.2012.01349.x>.



Figure 1. *The First and Second Island Chains in the Western Pacific*¹⁸

The grouping of these islands into chains originated as a Chinese strategy concept. It posited Beijing as the locus of a maritime Asia and visualized the chains spreading outward from Chinese ports.¹⁹ This school of thought originally coined the terms First and Second Island Chain, and was primarily defensive or exploratory in nature. From a Sino-centric vantage point,

¹⁸ Yoshihara, "China's Vision of Its Seascape," p. 295.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 294.

the islands parallel nearly all of China's coastline, thus "[infusing] the island chain concept with tangible geospatial meaning and unity."²⁰ This model of the Pacific slowly began to leak into Western sphere in the late 1980s due to the work of You Ji and You Xu, Chinese scholars at Australian National University.²¹

As China's conception of the First Island Chain began to trickle into Western thought, an exchange occurred whereby each side examined the model in light of the other's strategy. For American theorists, China's outward gaze could be represented by the sea lanes the islands formed. Naval strategist Bernard Cole argues that PLA Navy desires to command both chains and view them as tangible features which define their operational capabilities.²² He ultimately dismisses the conception as too tainted by China's continentalism: "It violates the central tenet of classic maritime strategy that while the soldier thinks of terrain and theaters, the sailor of necessity thinks in wider terms outside immediate physical limits— there is no 'terrain' at sea."²³

On the other side of the ocean, Chinese theorists were much more concerned by America's view of the island chains. Its intended use, to box in Sino-Soviet influence, "reinforced long-standing Chinese interpretations of hostile American intentions towards China."²⁴ The stakes are higher for China as well— contrast their doomsday scenario with America's. Should the PLA control the First Island Chain, it would likely mark the end of

²⁰ Yoshihara, "China's Vision of Its Seascape," p. 294.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Bernard D. Cole, *The Great Wall at Sea: China's Navy in the 21st Century* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute, 2010), p. 177.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Yoshihara, "China's Vision of Its Seascape," p. 296.

significant US influence in the Pacific and downgrade America from a global to a regional hegemon. A momentous loss, but one which ends with the U.S. intact as a nation. However, U.S. control of the First Island Chain represents a historically existential threat to China through the avenue they fear most— the sea.

As with much of the world, China's strategy is heavily influenced by history and geography. It is one of the oldest civilizations in the world, as ancient farmers settled the fertile North China Plain, where the Yellow and Yangtze rivers arrive to the sea (See Figure Two).²⁵ Much of Chinese history, beginning in the Warring States period, has sought to control or protect the plain— The Great Wall was built to keep the hordes from Manchuria easily crossing into the flatland.²⁶ As China expanded west, it controlled the Xinjiang region as a buffer, and the Himalayas and Tibet are a formidable mountain border. The mountains continue south, fencing off what is now Myanmar and Laos. Until the 19th century, China was very secure as these mountains and arduous distances discouraged adversaries.²⁷ Then, the Europeans brought war via the sea— something China had never had to contend with.

At one point China commanded the largest fleet at any point in history— the Treasure Fleet consisted of 1,700 massive nine-mast vessels at its peak in the 14th century. However, the fleet was disbanded over fears of the trade it enabled with other nations. It became a crime to

²⁵ Ling Zhang. "Pre-1048: Prelude to the Environmental Drama." *The River, the Plain, and the State: An Environmental Drama in Northern Song China, 1048–1128* (2016), 21–138. Studies in Environment and History. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

²⁶ Alan Williams. "The Great Wall of China by Claire Roberts and Geremie R Barmie." *Art Book* 16, no. 3 (August 2009): 76–77. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8357.2009.01050_2.x

²⁷ Ibid.

even sail, and China disavowed foreign trade for the next 500 years.²⁸ As mentioned, the Europeans arrived and exploited this weakness to force trade. The Chinese were embarrassed in the Opium Wars with Britain, only for Japan to invade both Manchuria and the prized North China Plain during World War II.²⁹ China has never forgotten this humiliation, and thus the formulation of its grand strategy and fixation on the First Island Chain and broader Pacific.

Allowing another Western power to control and threaten China from the sea represents a colossal failure to Beijing. Not only for the previously mentioned historical grievances because Chinese strategy is predicated on avoiding encirclement, as shown by the board game *wei qi*. A widely popular, traditional Chinese game, it can be translated as “encirclement board.”³⁰ The players do not seek to annihilate each other, but rather to unite their pieces and surround their adversary’s. When presented with an antagonist who seeks encircle, as China perceives America intends to do in the Pacific, it is strategically beneficial to break through such containment before it is used against them.

Appraisal of the Strategic Significance of the Diaoyus

Admiral Alfred Mahan, one of history’s greatest naval strategy, wrote that the “portions of the earth’s surface, and their consequent interest to mankind, differ from time to time.”³¹ This is especially true of the Diaoyus. For much of history, the uninhabited islands were an afterthought, changing hands between China and Japan. However, islands are given strategic

²⁸ Jeremy Smith, “The Fall of China's Treasure Fleet,” *Business Insights: Global*, April 2002. https://bi.gale.com/global/article/GALE%7CA178896597?u=vic_liberty&sid=summon

²⁹ Rossen Vassilev, "China's Opium Wars: Britain as the World's First Narco-State." *New Politics* 13, no. 1 (Summer, 2010): p. 75.

³⁰ Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon*. p. 45.

³¹ Alfred Mahan, *The Interest of America in Sea Power, Present and Future* (Forgotten Books, 2018).

significance not by geographic position alone, but also by the geopolitical situations around them. Mahan correctly predicted that Cuba would occupy increasing prominence in American strategic thinking, which came true during the Cold War and ultimately the Cuban Missile Crisis.³²

Such is the state of affairs surrounding the Diaoyus. The group of islands are uninhabited and sporadically visited due to their mountainous nature. The five main islands are 钓鱼 (*Diaoyu*), 赤尾 (*Chiwei*), 黄尾 (*Huangwei*), 北小 (*Beixiao*), and 南小 (*Nanxiao*) [See Figure Three]. Three smaller islets are little more than rocky outcroppings—北 (*Bei*), 南 (*Nan*), and 飞 (*Fei*). Considering China's increasing global ambitions and opposition to US dominance in the Pacific, the islands are perfectly situated to provide Beijing an avenue to expand in both aspirations. As it is contested by Japan, China, and Taiwan, a decisive claim to the territory by the PRC would elevate their global standing in the international system while lending more credibility to their claims in the South China Sea. Additionally, the Diaoyus are located at a strategic point crucial to China's economic and military access to the Pacific. As a final benefit, the archipelago's proximity to Taiwan would increase the PLA's naval and aerial capabilities directed at the ROC.³³

³² Mahan, *The Interest of America in Sea Power*, p. 7.

³³ Eric Sayers, "The 'Consequent Interest' of Japan's Southwestern Islands," *Naval War College Review* 66, no. 2 (2013): p. 45.



Figure 2. Map of the Western Pacific with the Diaoyu Islands highlighted³⁴

Mahan’s formula to appraise the value of islands is threefold— its proximity to important sea lines of communication, its ability to defend itself, and its resources.³⁵ The Diaoyus are strong contenders in all three considerations. The archipelago is central to China’s commercial shipping— Shanghai, Ningbo, and Hong Kong all send seaborne traffic bound for North

³⁴ Michael Lipin, Alison Klein, and Dino Beslagic, “The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands - an Interactive Map,” VOA (The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands - An Interactive Map, December 12, 2016), <https://www.voanews.com/a/senkaku-diaoyu-islands-map/3632772.html>.

³⁵ Alfred. T. Mahan and Allan F. Westcott, *Mahan on Naval Warfare: Selections from the Writing of Rear Admiral Alfred T. Mahan* (Lavergne, TN, 2013).

America through the Miyako Straits (See Figure Four).³⁶ Approximately a quarter of Sino-American trade travels through the straits, and the route is nearly a thousand kilometers shorter than alternative routes.³⁷ The strait is also a strategic access point to the larger Pacific for China's East Sea Fleet, whose headquarters are also in Ningbo. The Diaoyus' mountainous nature, particularly 钓鱼岛 (Diaoyu Island), renders them excellent for withstanding rocket or missile attacks.³⁸ Finally, the waters around the islands are incredibly resource-saturated—the U.S. Energy Information Administration estimates there could be over 100 million barrels' worth of petroleum and natural gas nearby.³⁹ The combination of these factors only serve to raise the strategic value of the Diaoyus. Though attention has only shifted onto them recently, it's no surprise the islands have been a source of contention between China and Japan for quite some time.

Brief History of China and Japan's Claims to the Diaoyus

The Diaoyus' history begins with the establishment of the Ryukyu Kingdom in 1429, stretching from the Amami Islands in the north to the Sakishima Islands in the south.⁴⁰ The kingdom paid tribute to both the Japanese shogun and the Chinese emperor. This period lends China its strongest claim to the Diaoyus, as during this period they were traditional fishing

³⁶ Yoshihara, "China's Vision of Its Seascape," p. 304.

³⁷ Editorial Board. (2004). "China's Sea Exit Problem Has Not Been Completely Resolved" [中国的出海口 问题还没有彻底解决]. *Water Transportation Digest* [水路运输文摘], 11, 27–28.

³⁸ Bert Chapman, "Geopolitical Implications of the Sino-Japanese East China Sea Dispute for the U.S.," *Geopolitics, History, and International Relations* 9, no. 2 (2017): p. 15, <https://doi.org/10.22381/ghir9220172>, p. 19.

³⁹ "East China Sea." International - U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA). Accessed January 20, 2022. https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/regions-of-interest/East_China_Sea.

⁴⁰ Eric Sayers, "The 'Consequent Interest' of Japan's Southwestern Islands," *Naval War College Review* 66, no. 2 (2013): p. 46.

grounds for Chinese and Taiwanese fishermen.⁴¹ Chinese historical records claim more than tributary, however, and show the islands as part of China as early as the fifteenth century.⁴² However, in 1609 the Japanese Satsuma kingdom invaded and took control of the Ryukyus, ruling them for several centuries.⁴³

In 1872, the Japanese Meiji incorporated the Ryukyu Kingdom into the Prefecture of Okinawa. Specific to the Diaoyus, China and Japan signed the Treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895 which transferred Taiwan and its affiliated islands to Japan.⁴⁴ This arraignment stood until World War II when the U.S. invaded Japan.⁴⁵ China asserts that the Cairo Declaration, a joint statement issued by China, the U.K., and the U.S., requires “all territories Japan has stolen from the Chinese” including the Diaoyus be returned to Chinese possession.⁴⁶ However, the greater Ryukyus would remain under American administration during the reconstruction of Japan until full sovereignty over the islands was conveyed back to Japan in 1972 who continue to administer them today.⁴⁷

⁴¹ Kristine Schenck, “China's Response to U.S.-Japan Coordination in the East China Sea,” *Asia Policy* 27, no. 3 (2020): pp. 43-57, <https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2020.0043>, p. 5.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Sayers, “The ‘Consequent Interest’ of Japan's Southwestern Islands,” p. 46.

⁴⁴ Chapman, “Geopolitical Implications of the Sino-Japanese East China Sea Dispute for the U.S.,” p. 19.

⁴⁵ Sayers, “The ‘Consequent Interest’ of Japan's Southwestern Islands,” p. 46.

⁴⁶ “The Diaoyu Islands: The Owner and the Thief.” Embassy of the People's Republic of China to Denmark. Accessed January 20, 2022. <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cedk/eng/ztbd/dydw/t1036401.htm>.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*



Figure 3. *Map of the Western Pacific with the Miyako Strait labeled*⁴⁸

Chinese Actions in the Diaoyus

Although China had always staked a claim to the Diaoyus, domestic and political interest was renewed in 2012 when Japan bought back the official rights to the three largest islands in the archipelago—钓鱼 (Diaoyu), 北小 (Beixiao), and 南小 (Nanxiao). They had been leased out to

⁴⁸ *The Straits Times* (Singapore Press Holdings, n.d.), https://static.straitstimes.com.sg/s3fs-public/attachments/2016/08/16/ST_20160816_MISSILE16_2523819.pdf.

private entities, but once Japan made them public again it solidified Tokyo's claim to the islands. This led to violent protests in dozens of Chinese cities by nationalists who threatened the Japanese embassy, causing a diplomatic crisis.⁴⁹ The issue is still largely unresolved, as both nations avoid international arbitration for fear of an unfavorable ruling.⁵⁰ Instead, China has enacted a series of campaigns to dispute and dislodge Japan's hold over the Diaoyus, primarily in both the air and sea domains.

The most frequently occurring provocations occur in the air. In response to Japan purchasing the Diaoyus as previously mentioned, China established an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea in 2013. According to international law, they have a right to do so— however, the new ADIZ not only encompassed the Diaoyus but also significantly overlapped with Japan's pre-existing ADIZ (See Figure Five).⁵¹ The PLA Air Force regularly conducts military practices within the zone, with the simultaneous objectives of enforcing China's ADIZ while destabilizing Japan's. In 2015 alone, Chinese planes intruded into Japan's airspace 571 times, forcing Japan to scramble defensive jets each time— and these incidents have only increased.⁵²

⁴⁹ Ian Johnson and Thom Shanker, "Beijing Mixes Messages over Anti-Japan Protests," *The New York Times* (The New York Times, September 16, 2012), <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/17/world/asia/anti-japanese-protests-over-disputed-islands-continue-in-china.html>.

⁵⁰ Carlos Ramos-Mrosovsky, "International Law's Unhelpful Role in the Senkaku Islands," *University of Pennsylvania Journal of International Law*, 29 (4)(2008): 906–907, 928; <http://scholarship.law.upenn.edu/jil/vol29/iss4/2/>

⁵¹ Chapman, "Geopolitical Implications of the Sino-Japanese East China Sea Dispute for the U.S.," p. 21.

⁵² Japanese Ministry of Defense, "Statistics on Scrambles through Fiscal Year 2015," (Tokyo: Ministry of Defense, April 22, 2016): 1, 3–4; http://www.mod.go.jp/js/Press/press2016/press_pdf/p20160422_03.pdf

In the naval domain, the PRC has maintained a permanent presence in the twenty-four nautical mile contiguous zone off the Diaoyus every day since the spring of 2019, using armed Coast Guard vessels converted from naval warships to sail around the archipelago, and sometimes through Japanese territorial waters.⁵³ Shigeo Akimoto, a former Japan Coast Guard (JCG) vice commandant, estimates the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) intrudes on average “three times per month with four ships, one of them armed, for an hour and a half per incident.”⁵⁴

This paramilitary trend favors China, as they can impose their will around the Diaoyus. For example, a Lao Airlines flight was turned back from Beijing in 2015 after not complying with China’s ECS ADIZ regulations.⁵⁵ In 2016 over fifteen CCG ships escorted over two hundred Chinese civilian fishing boats around the archipelago, “demonstrating Beijing’s capability at any time to outnumber the JCG.”⁵⁶ And in May 2020, the CCG harassed a Japanese fishing boat within Japanese territorial waters, claiming its fishing activities were illegal.⁵⁷ These specific incidents are only a small sample of a much larger body of evidence, showing how contentious the issue is for China to devote significant military energy towards it.

⁵³ Tetsuo Kotani, “China’s Military and Paramilitary Activities in the East China Sea: Trends and Assessments for the U.S.-Japan Alliance,” *Asia Policy* 27, no. 3 (2020): p. 9, <https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2020.0040>

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁵⁵ Chapman, “Geopolitical Implications of the Sino-Japanese East China Sea Dispute for the U.S.,” p. 22.

⁵⁶ Kotani, “China’s Military and Paramilitary Activities in the East China Sea” p. 9.

⁵⁷ Tetsuo Kotani, “China Steps up Its Offensive against the Senkaku Islands,” *The Japan Times*, June 22, 2020, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2020/06/02/commentary/world-commentary/china-steps-offensive-senkaku-islands/#.XujoPEVKiUk>.

Relevance of the *Thirty-Six Stratagems* to Chinese Strategy in the Diaoyus

The Diaoyus are but one facet of China's current maritime strategy in the East China Sea. As mentioned previously, China's consistent security concern is its Eastern coast and naval vulnerabilities. As such, Beijing is seeking to expand its "interior control over its Near Seas to eventually achieve a level of continental control it believes it needs to enhance its security interests."⁵⁸ Peter Dutton, a strategic researcher at the U.S. Naval War College, characterizes China's actions as "non-militarized coercion."⁵⁹ This does not mean that the military is not involved— as mentioned, China's ADIZ and Coast Guard incursions are frequent. Instead, "the military's role is indirect as part of the escalation control mechanism that China uses to not provoke conflict...as it pursues its objectives."⁶⁰ Ultimately, China is carefully manipulating its levers of national power to achieve its ends without provoking the ire of the U.S.; an approach which should evoke the craftiness of the *Thirty-Six Stratagems*.

The stratagems are part and parcel of this approach, and are especially useful given that they are intended for use during situations such as these. The *Thirty-Six Stratagems* are aimed at deviating from the routine, using cunning, and orienting the user towards inventive problem-solving— an apt description for China's approach to the Diaoyus. Due to the adaptive nature of the stratagems, there are multiple sayings which could be invoked to explain China's actions. In much the same way, the Chinese strategy is multifaceted; involving aerial, naval, and diplomatic

⁵⁸ Chapman, "Geopolitical Implications of the Sino-Japanese East China Sea Dispute for the U.S.," p. 33.

⁵⁹ Maritime Sovereignty in the East and South China Seas: Joint hearing before the Subcommittee on Seapower and Projection Forces of the Committee on Armed Services Meeting Jointly with the Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific of the Committee on Foreign Affairs (serial no. 113-137), House of Representatives, One Hundred Thirteenth Congress, Second Session, hearing held January 14, 2014 § (n.d.), p. 11. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-113hhrg86962/pdf/CHRG-113hhrg86962.pdf>

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

approaches. Due to the scope of the issue, this thesis will focus on examining the naval activities of the PRC in the contested waters, using the first Stratagem: “Cross the Sea by Deceiving the Sky.”⁶¹

Examination of Chinese Naval Activities through the First Stratagem

In developing this case study, clear parameters for analysis must be first be established. As previously mentioned, only naval incursions by the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) or People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) will be examined. There are three primary tactics employed by China— CCG incursions into the waters surrounding or adjacent to the Diaoyus, fishing incursions in violation of Japan’s fishing boundaries, and PLAN vessels sailing past Japanese defenses in the Diaoyus and adjacent islands.

Before advancing this case study, however, the particulars of the first stratagem must be discussed. In doing so, there are a few translation variants which must be addressed. A strict translation of the original, and the most commonly used, is phrased “Crossing the sea while deceiving the heaven.”⁶² An alternative translation reads “Deceive the emperor and cross the sea,” and the difference in the two can be attributed to the Chinese tradition of deifying their rulers. Some Chinese authors will refer to the heavens in reference to the revered position of the Emperor, thus the ambiguity.⁶³

As previously mentioned, the stratagems are written using only four Mandarin characters, thus their brevity and occasional opacity. However, this stratagem references an ancient Chinese folk tale; one instantly familiar to native readers. From this tale the intended meaning of the

⁶¹ Senger, *36 Stratagems for Business*, p. 39.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 40.

stratagem can be inferred. During the reign of the Tang dynasty, Emperor Taizong launched a military offensive against the proto-Korean kingdom of Koguryo. To do so, the Chinese army would need to sail across the Yellow Sea. However, Emperor Taizong was afraid of seasickness and so intended on cancelling the campaign. His general, Xue Rengui, was devoted to the offensive and so devised to trick the Emperor. General Xue invited him to a banquet, and entered through a dark tunnel into a great hall, where they dined for several days. After the feast ended, the Emperor noticed the sound of waves, and thus realized he had been tricked into boarding a ship bound for Korea. Upon discovering that they were nearly arrived, Emperor Taizong decided to procede, and the campaign was successful.⁶⁴ Thus, the stratagem can be more clearly translated for the Westerner as “Deceiving the Emperor [by inviting him to a house by the sea that is really a disguised ship] and [thus causing him to] cross the sea.”⁶⁵

As with many of the stratagems, this saying encompasses a variety of applications. Most pertinent to the Diaoyus is that of creating a blind spot in the victim’s perception of reality. As Sinologist Herro von Senger writes, it involves the transformation of “clandestine activities into routine procedures that are generally visible, but no longer monitored very carefully, and thus [able to be carried out] unseen.”⁶⁶ Emperor Taizong assumed he was attending a banquet, when he was in fact sailing across the ocean. He was lulled into overlooking the indications of naval travel by General Xue’s deception. The stratagem could also be applied to leveraging circumstances to violate the established order, creating favorable *de facto* circumstances— “to

⁶⁴ “瞒天过海” [Deceiving the heavens and crossing the sea: English translation] - English Story. <https://en.bbook.top/story/folk/26210>.

⁶⁵ Senger, *36 Stratagems for Business*, p. 39.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

do something that is actually quite inadmissible in front of everyone's eyes and get away with it scot-free."⁶⁷ To violate the Emperor's wishes or deceive him would certainly have incurred severe punishment in normal circumstances. However, due his trickery, General Xue was able to escape such consequences.

With even a cursory examination of China's maritime actions in the Diaoyus, both applications of the first stratagem are readily apparent. In response to Chinese aggression in the archipelago, Japan has increased its defensive posture around the island and devoted significant financial resources to the effort.⁶⁸ The Japanese Defense Force (JDF) installed coastal observation facilities on Yonaguni Island, increased C3I capabilities, anti-ship missile batteries, and adjusted fighter squadron postures to increase operational readiness.⁶⁹ However, these attempts at deterrence play right into China's hand. A simple fact of the geography of the East China Sea is that the PLAN Eastern Fleet cannot reach the greater Pacific without its ships sailing through the waters of Japanese islands. In doing so, these navigational routes travel past the aforementioned defenses, lending a golden opportunity for China to gather intelligence on the operations and positions of the deterrents it faces.⁷⁰ Indeed, the PRC has taken advantage of such prospects already, as "Chinese Navy intelligence gathering vessels have repeatedly been spotted

⁶⁷ Senger, *36 Strategems for Business*, p. 40.

⁶⁸ Bert Chapman, "Geopolitical Implications of the Sino-Japanese East China Sea Dispute for the U.S.," *Geopolitics, History, and International Relations* 9, no. 2 (2017): <https://doi.org/10.22381/ghir9220172>, p. 25.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Felix Chang, "The Ryukyu Defense Line: Japan's Response to China's Naval Push into the Pacific Ocean," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, February 17, 2021, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2021/02/the-ryukyu-defense-line-japans-response-to-chinas-naval-push-into-the-pacific-ocean/>.

near the Senkaku Islands, as well as in or near other Japanese territorial waters.”⁷¹ Furthermore, JDF doctrine demands that Japanese armed forces escort these intruders through Japan’s waters, providing another excellent opportunity for the PLA to ascertain exactly what sort of aerial and naval response they might one day provoke through kinetic conflict.

In addition to intelligence-gathering, China’s use of the first stratagem also has a negative effect on the JDF. The repeated navigations through the Ryukyu chain and frequent CCG incursions into the Diaoyus are not kinetic, but warrant a response from the JDF and Japanese Coast Guard (JCG). Over time, these constant deployments can diminish Japan’s perception of the risk of conflict over the Diaoyus, even as the actual threat may not change.⁷² Although Japan recognizes the threat to their territorial claim and has devoted the resources necessary to contest China’s assertive actions, these actions could have the double-edged effect of degrading the necessary effectiveness and readiness.

The other application of the first stratagem, that of upsetting the established order by trickery, is evident primarily through the actions of the CCG. A prime example is the previously mentioned incident where CCG ships escorted Chinese fishing boats into the Diaoyus and enforced their ability to fish in the waters.⁷³ Japan, who administers the waters and determines fishing rights, was forced to allow Chinese boats to temporarily fish in the waters. Such action on China’s part was unacceptable under international norms, and yet Japan was forced to acquiesce

⁷¹ Thomas Joscelyn, “What’s behind China’s Dangerous Incursion into the East China Sea?,” *Foundation for the Defense of Democracies*, March 22, 2021, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2021/03/19/whats-behind-chinas-dangerous-incursion/>.

⁷² Catharine H. Rankin et al., “Habituation Revisited: An Updated and Revised Description of the Behavioral Characteristics of Habituation,” *Neurobiology of Learning and Memory* 92, no. 2 (2009): pp. 135-138, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nlm.2008.09.012>.

⁷³ Kotani, “China’s Military and Paramilitary Activities in the East China Sea,” p. 9.

like Emperor Taizong. However, unlike the Emperor, Japan might find itself forced to accept less than favorable circumstances.

Implications for Future Policy

The significance of the *Thirty-Six Stratagems* to Chinese strategy in the East China Sea should not be lost on US and Japanese policymakers. Such insight allows greater clarity into how allied policy might be received and countered by China. For example, RAND recently proposed four calculated measures the US and Japan could seek to implement. First, joint evaluations of Japan's responses to "sudden, large numbers of Chinese military aircraft flight operations" near Japan ought to occur.⁷⁴ Second, joint dialogue of reprioritization of JDF assets to the Ryukyus should take place during discussions of US force realignment.⁷⁵ Third, the US should assist Japan in evolving their scramble and escort protocols to preserve resources while still facing threats from Chinese incursions.⁷⁶ Finally, RAND proposed joint military exercises in the East China Sea "timed to the Chinese political calendar... that could make [China] appear ineffectual in comparison."⁷⁷

These are well-balanced measures which equip Japan to respond to China's actions without drawing the US into the conflict. However, policymakers should avoid the trap of calculating policy solely through a Western framework. As demonstrated, China's actions are through-and-through Eastern, not just influenced by the stratagems but similar literature as well.

⁷⁴ Edmund Burke, et al. "China's Military Activities in the East China Sea - Rand." *RAND*, 2018. https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2500/RR2574/RAND_RR2574.pdf. p. 26.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

Failing to understand China's actions in their Chinese context fundamentally increases the risk of miscalculation, possibly leading to unintended consequences. For example, an alteration of JDF scramble and escort protocols could be perceived as proof of success by Beijing. Having successfully altered the status quo to one advantageous to them and draining to Japan, China might increase the number of instigating aerial operations, invalidating the measures taken by the allies.

Analyses like the ones performed in this thesis are invaluable as the US and the Western order are challenged by revisionist powers like China. Indeed, further study into the influence of the *Thirty-Six Stratagems* on Chinese strategy writ large must be conducted. However, study itself will not provide enough to contain China's ambitions. It must be integrated into how the West views China's actions and thus into policymaking. The true power of the *Thirty-Six Stratagems* often lies not in the exceptional cunning of the user, but in the ignorance of the victim.

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