

The Five Mediterraneans: contested spaces, geopolitical theories, and conflicts in the Gray Zone

Dr. Andrea Gallo

University of Venice Ca' Foscari and.gallo@unive.it

University of Trieste ANDREA.GALLO3@phd.units.it

Today's protagonists



Alferd Thayer Mahan

The Influence
of Sea power
upon History -
1890



Alford Mackinder

The Geographical
Pivot of History –
The Geographical
Journal - 1904



Giuseppe Fioravanzo

Basi Navali nel
Mondo – ISPI
(Istituto per gli
studi di Politica
Internazionale)
1936



Nicholas Spykman

The
geography of
peace - 1944



Samual Huntigton

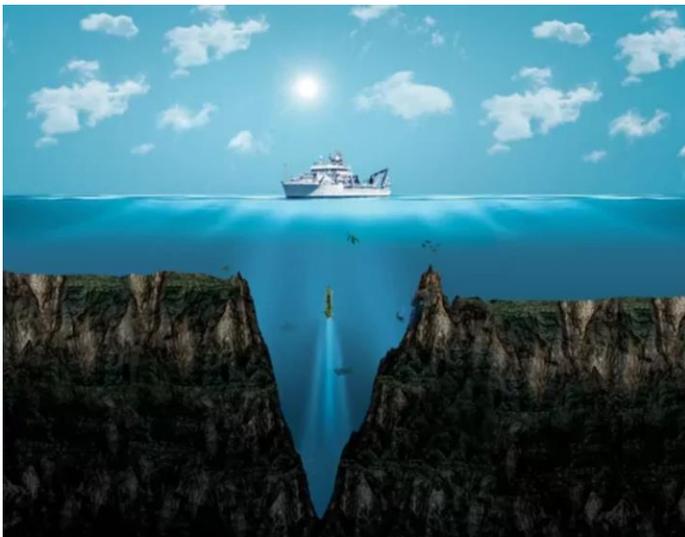
National Policy and
the Transoceanic
Navy -
U.S. Naval Institute
Proceeding - 1954

The sea as a two-dimensional space

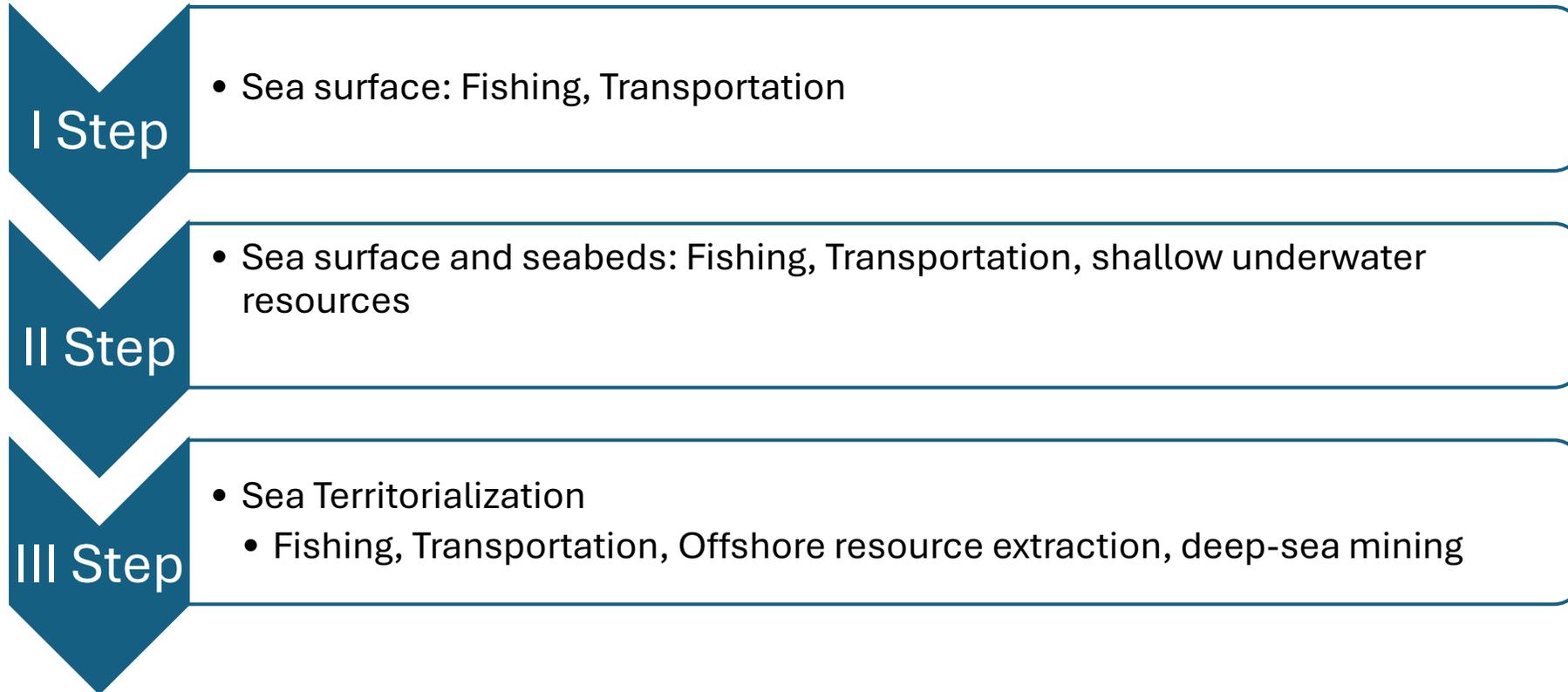


The sea is characterized by two fundamental dimensions:

- The first dimension is the surface dimension: the space connecting different lands. (connections between points in space for the movement of goods and people)
- The second dimension is the vertical dimension: a space that has depth and can also be exploited in its underwater part.



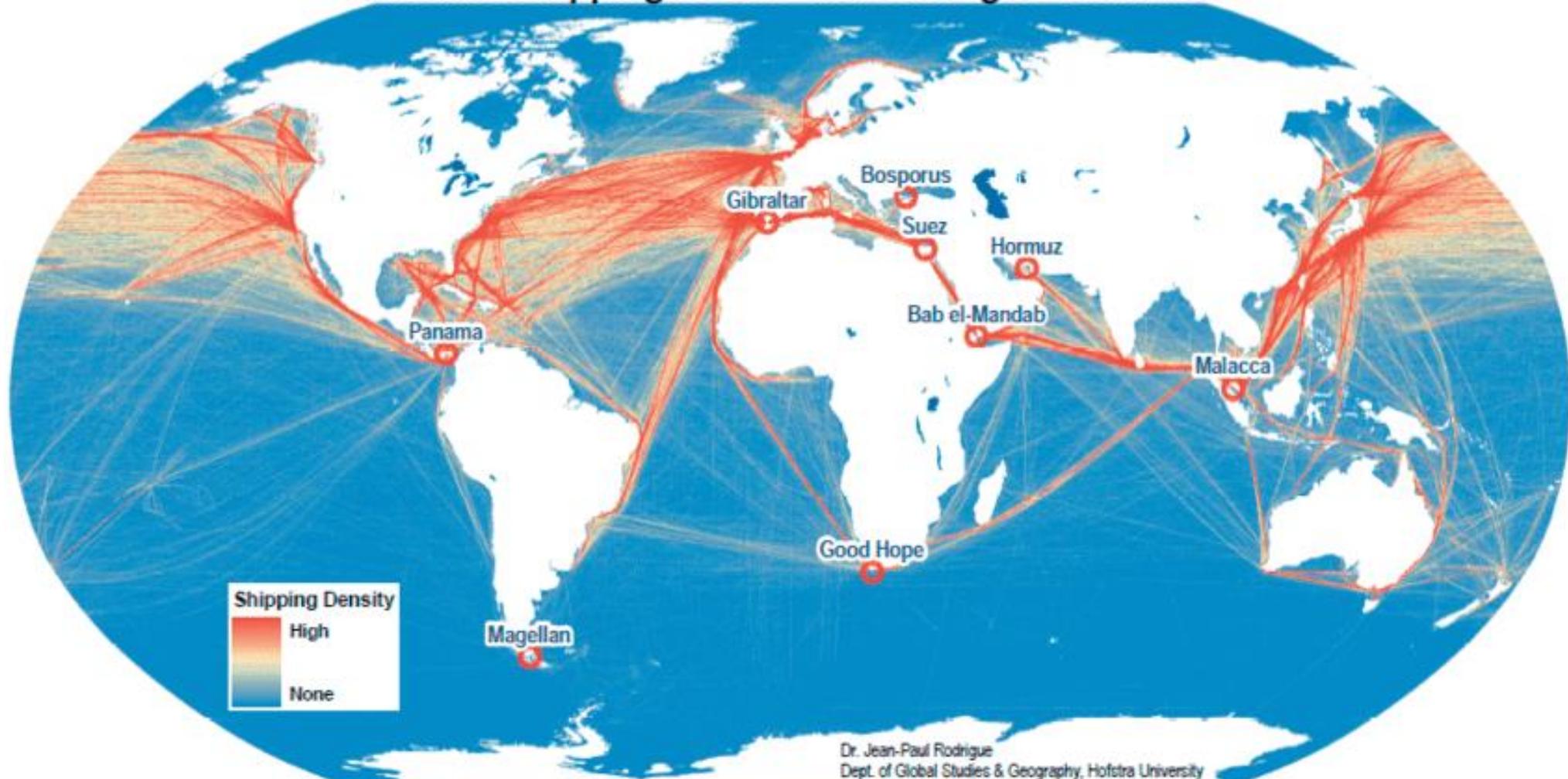
Three Stages of the Sea as a Resource



The size of maritime transport remains the most significant

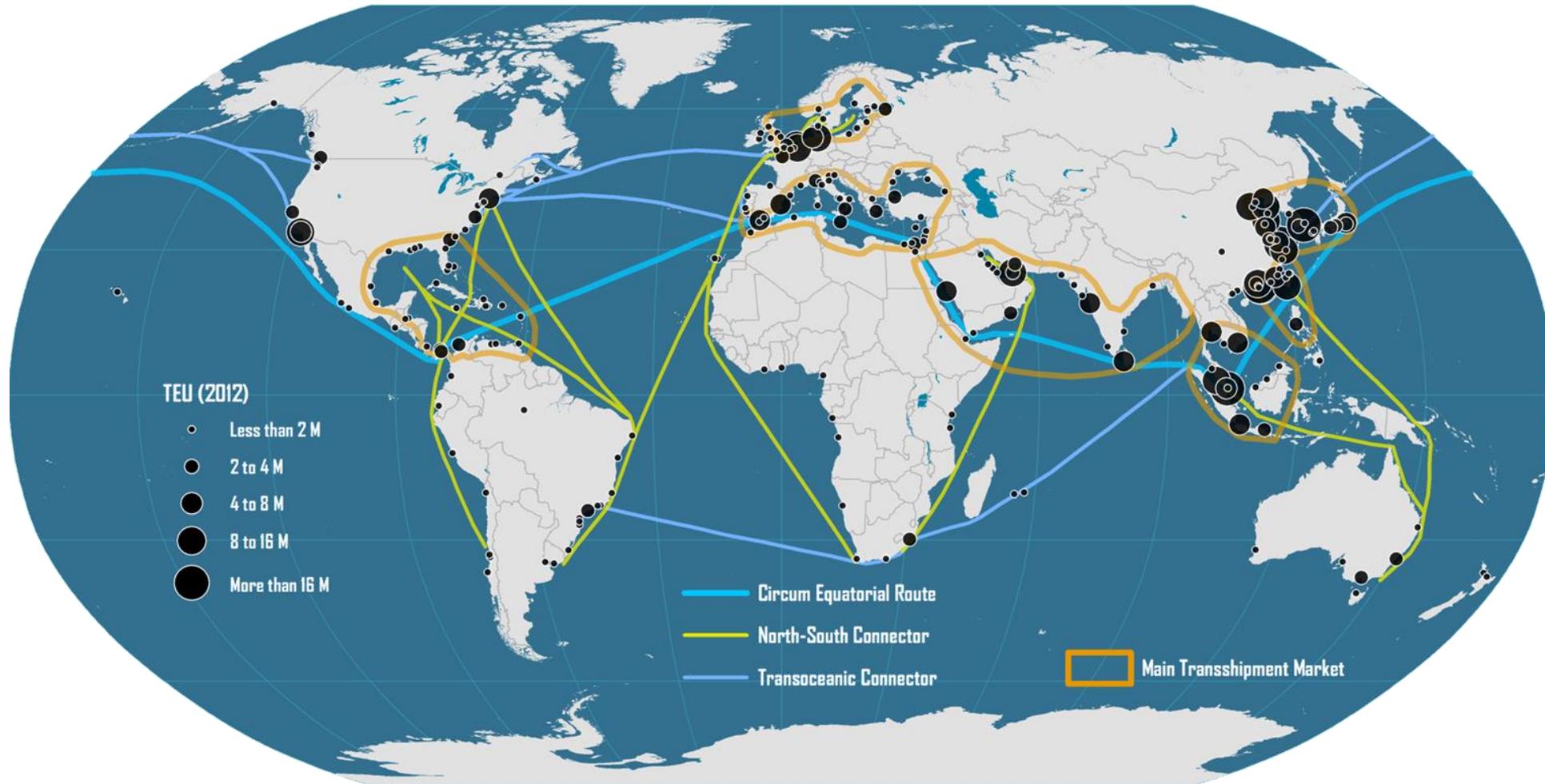
The Main Routes

Maritime Shipping Routes and Strategic Locations



Dr. Jean-Paul Rodrigue
Dept. of Global Studies & Geography, Hofstra University

Source: Shipping density data adapted from National Center for Ecological Analysis and Synthesis, A Global Map of Human Impacts to Marine Ecosystems.



There are therefore regional reference markets, which do not exhaust their dynamics at regional level but project them globally.

Consider, for example, the implications of the Bab el Mandeb crisis

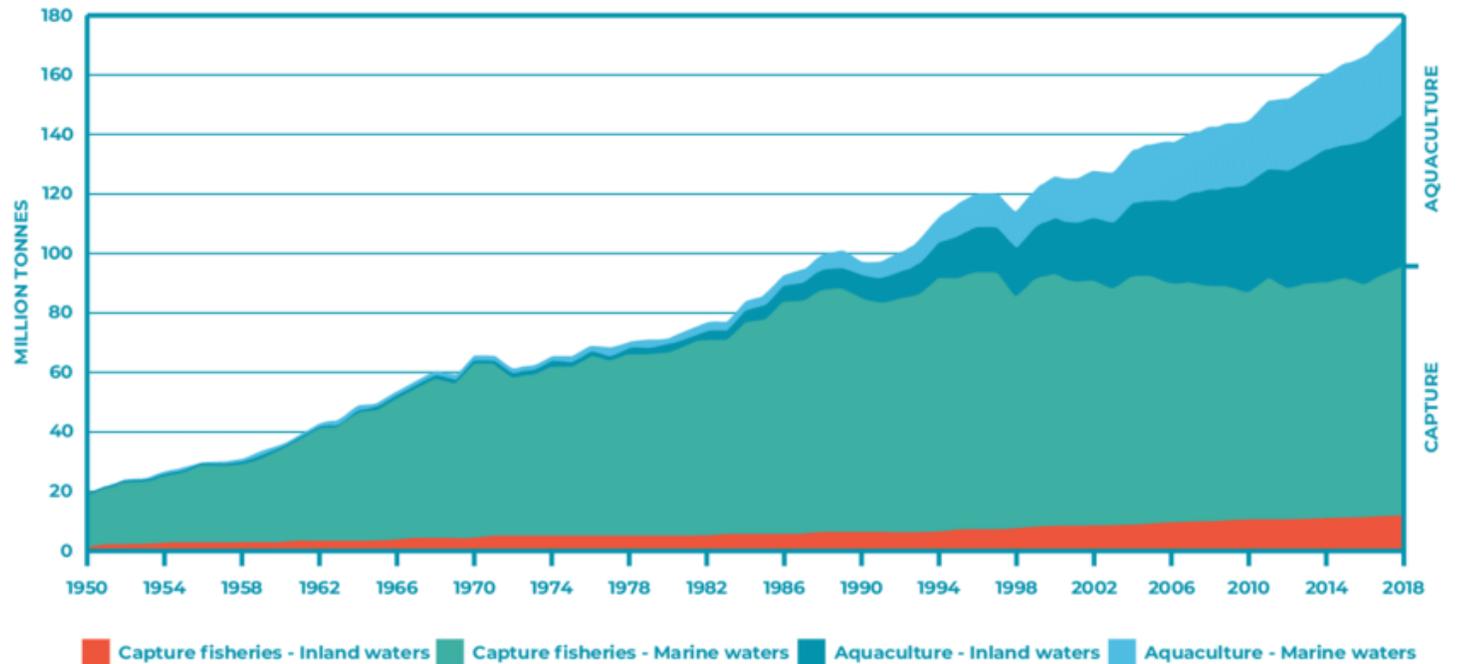
Consider, for example, the implications of a closure of the Strait of Hormuz

Not only transport

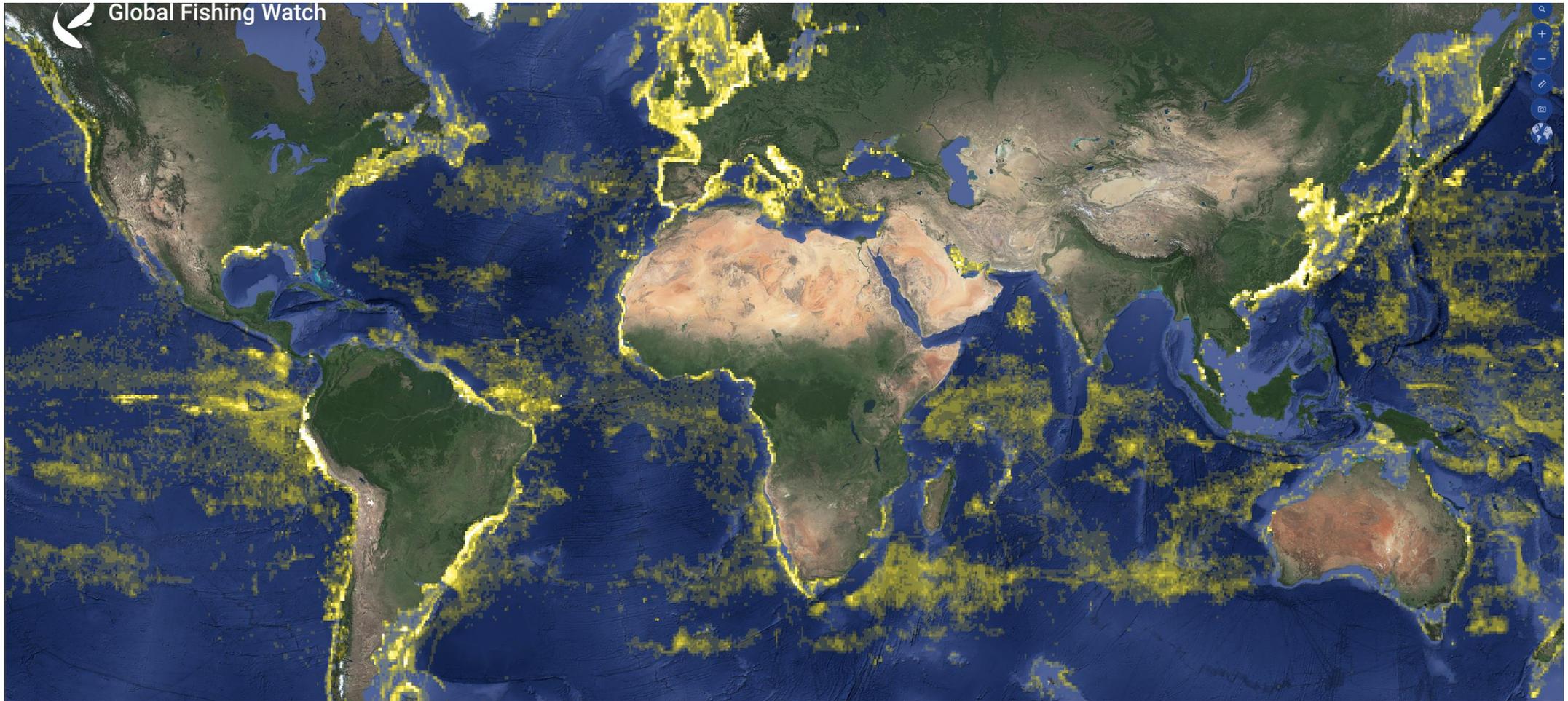
In addition to its surface aspects, the sea has other distinctive features: First and foremost, it is a provider of resources, such as food.

Fishing and aquaculture provide around 180 million tonnes per year, supplying 25% of global animal protein requirements.

There are problems of overfishing, and fishing can also become a factor of competition.



NOTE: Excludes aquatic mammals, crocodiles, alligators and caimans, seaweeds and other aquatic plants.
SOURCE: FAO



Problems of overfishing (and spillover in acts of piracy)

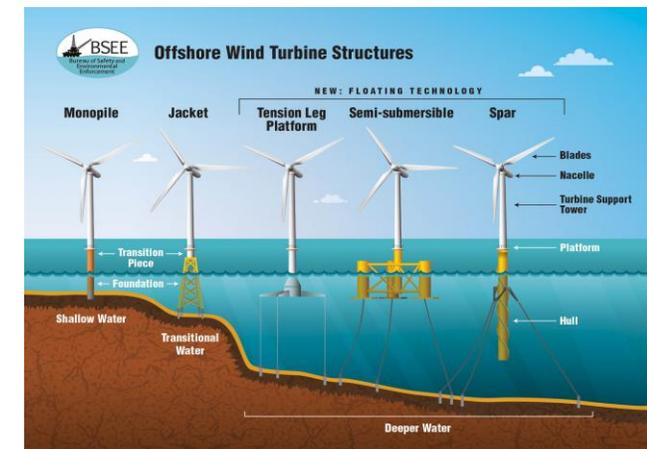
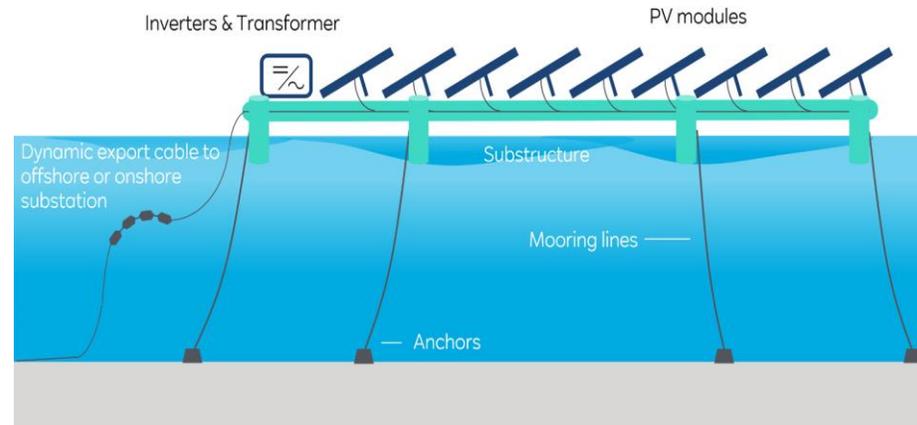
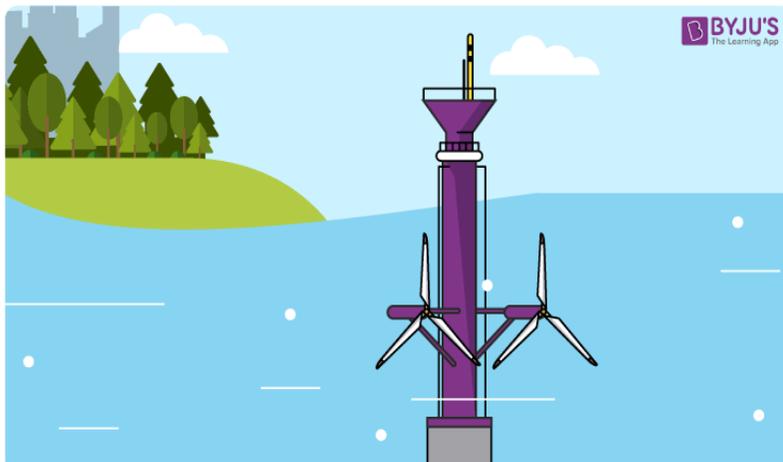
The sea as a hydrocarbon reservoir

- The seabed, and in particular the ocean floor, is also characterised by the presence of significant oil deposits that are still difficult to exploit, as the maximum operating capacity for offshore installations is approximately 3,000 metres.
- The ocean slopes also contain so-called “methane clathrates”, i.e. methane trapped in the form of dry ice.

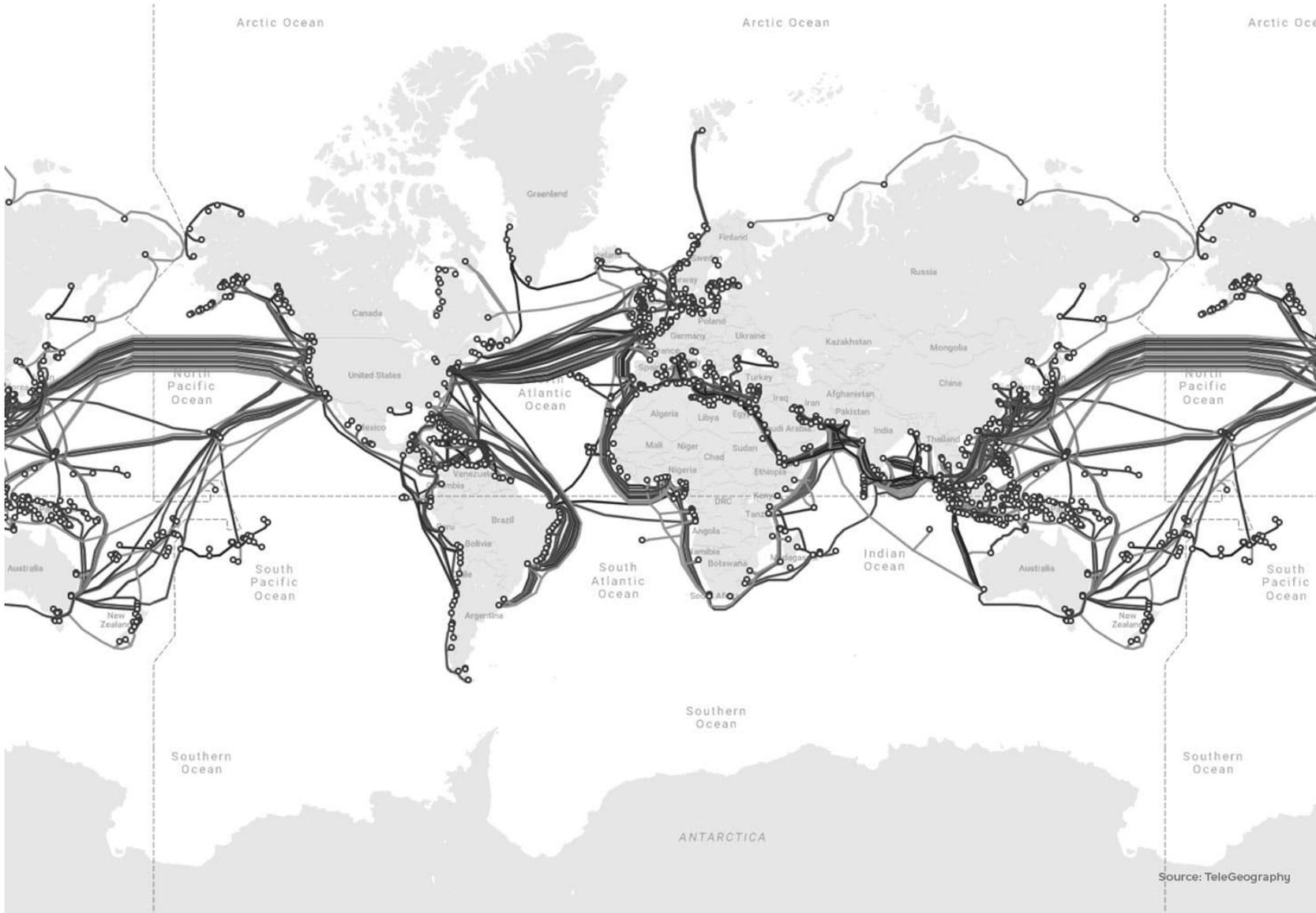
The sea supporting the energy transition

Green energy production from:

- Marine currents
- Tidal range
- Floating photovoltaic plants
- Offshore wind farms
- Waves energy



The data connection



- 10 trillion dollars are traded daily on financial markets via submarine fibre optic cables
- 98% of global internet traffic

The problem of territorialisation of the sea

● High seas ○ National waters



States are claiming an increasingly large portion of the sea, and in fact today the part of the sea that is not under the influence of states is represented only by the outermost part of the oceans.

Some fundamental seas: The Mediterranean Seas

The Mediterranean seas are:

The seas between lands, i.e. those seas that connect two or more continental masses.

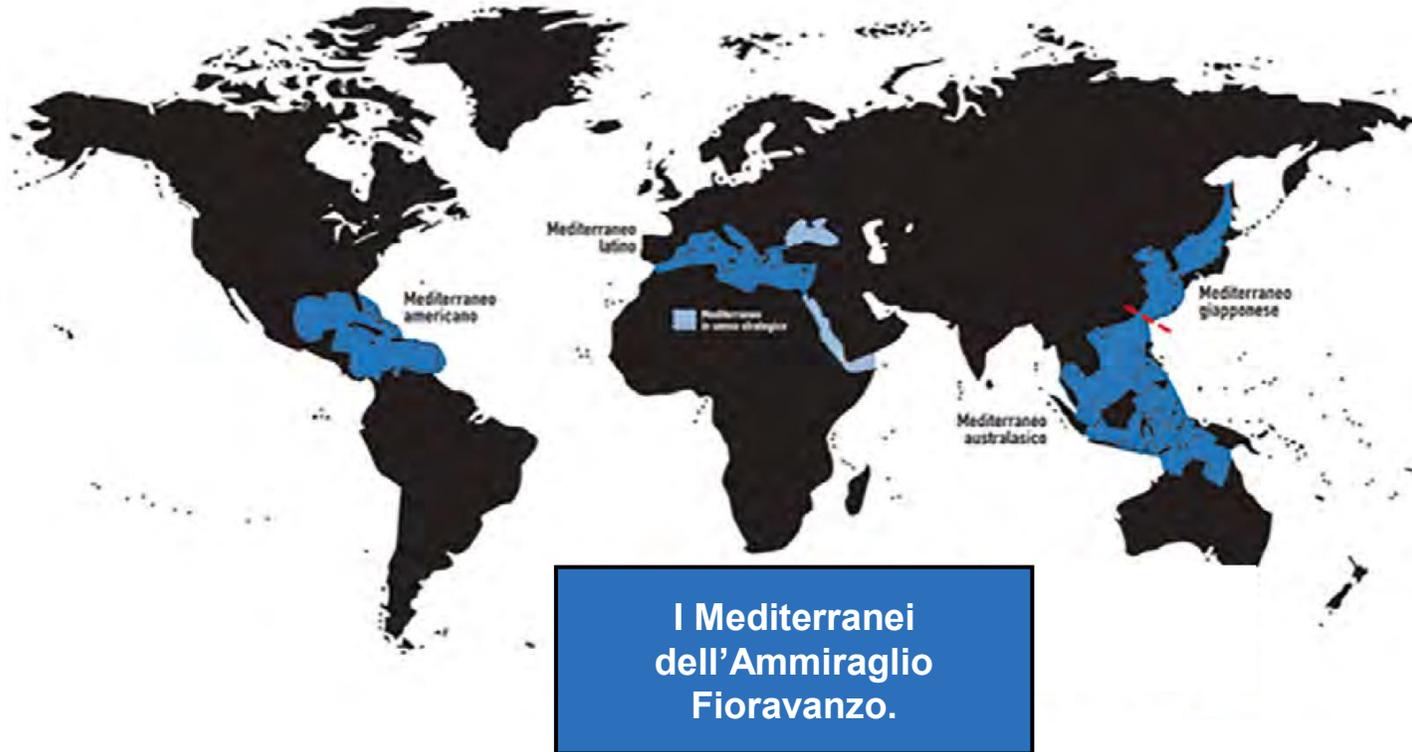
The so-called Mid-Ocean seas: those seas that connect oceanic maritime spaces.

Maritime spaces enclosed between choke points and all crossed by the circumpolar route.

Oceanography calls them 'marginal seas', a term that refers to the fact that they are on the margins of oceanic maritime spaces.

They can also be defined as 'pericontinental seas', i.e. close to continental land masses.

Some fundamental seas: The Mediterranean Seas



In 1936, Admiral Fioravanzo wrote 'Naval Bases: Aspects of Military and Strategic Geography,' a treatise in which he revisited the concept of Mediterranean mid-ocean spaces:

Latin Mediterranean (+ the extension of the Red Sea)

Mesoamerican Mediterranean (Gulf of Mexico + Caribbean Sea)

Australasian Mediterranean (South China Sea + Indonesian Seas)

Japanese Mediterranean (East China Sea + Sea of Korea)

From Fioravanzo to Spykeman

Admiral Fioravanzo's observations were then incorporated into the studies of Nicholas John Spykeman, an American geopolitician who in 1942 wrote the essay, later published in 1944, "The Geography of Peace", which did not explore Mackinder's ideas in depth in order to outline the world that would emerge after the Second World War.



Mackinder's Heartland concept - 1904



The Mackinderian heartland is defined as the landmass comprising European Russia and Asian Russia, and is the area which, according to the author, must be controlled in order to dominate the world. This represents the geopolitical pivot of the world system.

In identifying the Heartland, however, geopolitical thinking is rooted in a key infrastructure: the Trans-Siberian Railway, inaugurated in 1903.



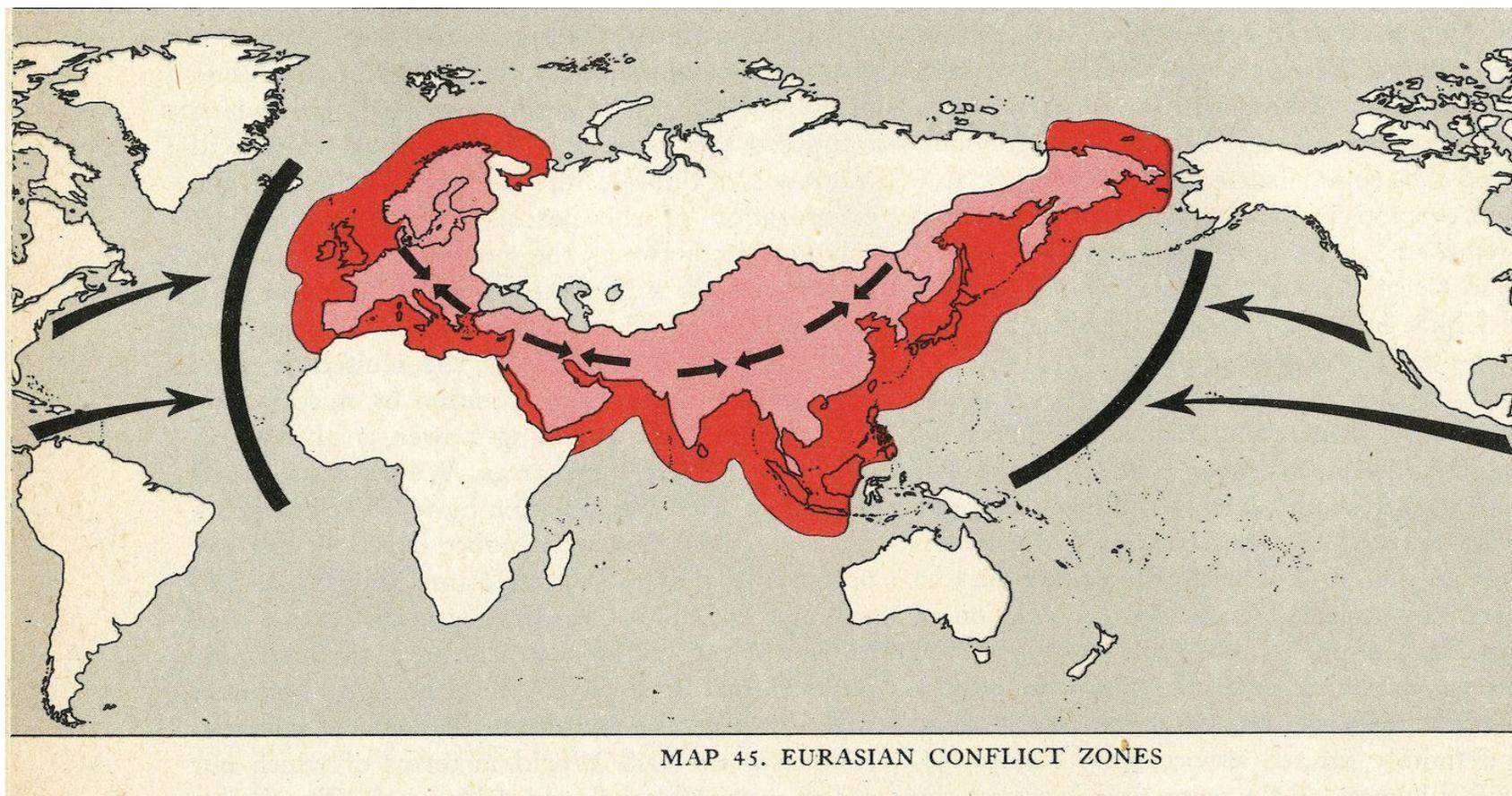
“Who controls the heartland controls the world” – Mackinder

Nel 1942 Spykman scrive: “Sconfitta la Germania e il Giappone, avremo come USA una sola missione: contenere l’espansione della massa continentale, identificata nell’Heartland, che è la massa euroasiatica identificabile esattamente con l’Unione Sovietica”.

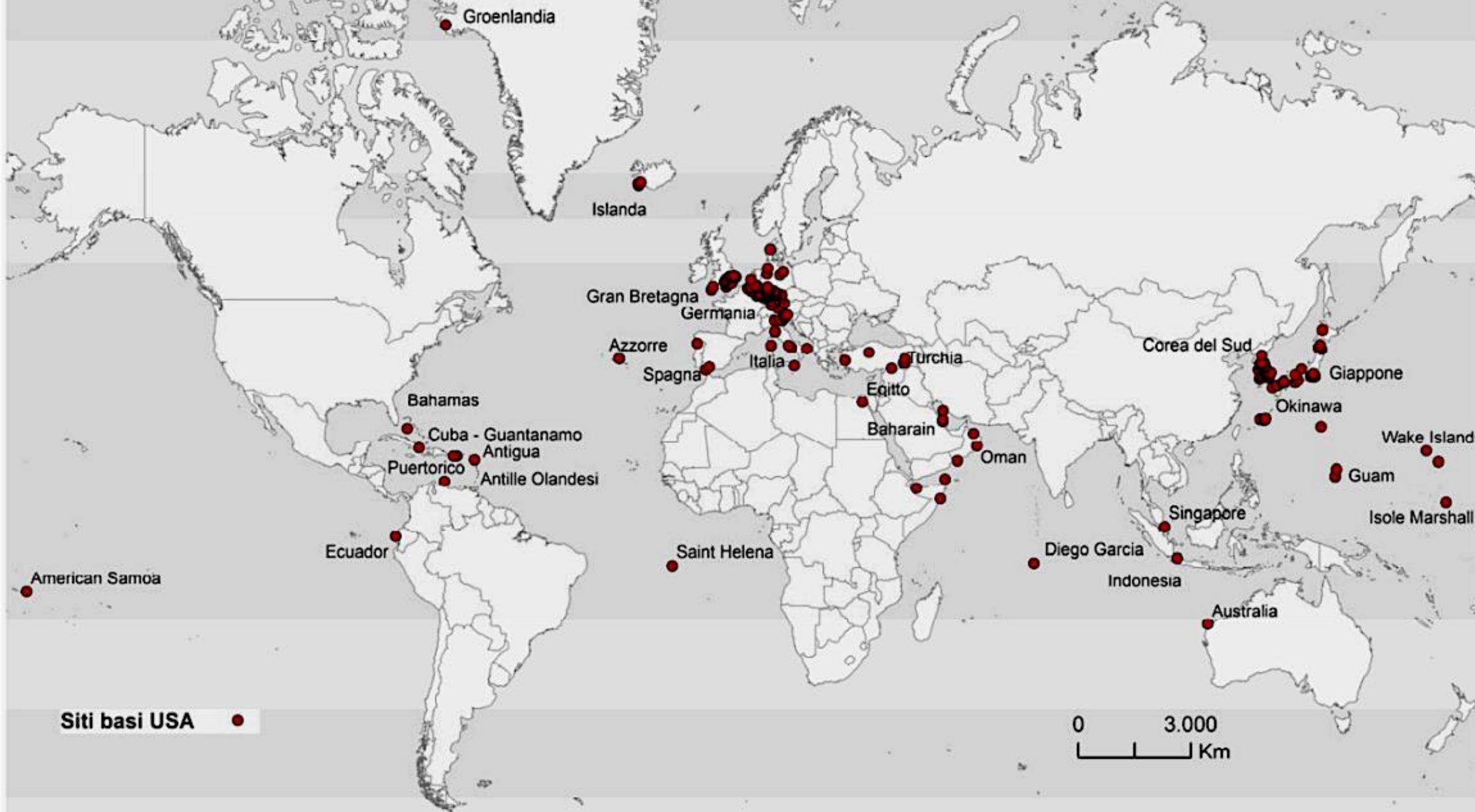
Quindi, vista la posizione sovietica nell’Heartland, nel ‘44 gli stati uniti hanno elaborato una strategia per provare a limitare questa forma di controllo: ovvero il controllo del Rimland.

Il Rimland è definite come la fascia euroasiatica che va dalla penisola scandinava all’Asia Centro-Meridionale fino ad arrivare allo stretto di Bering.

Il rimland è quindi l’area delle Penisole, e il potere anfibio è quello che permette di controllare la massa continentale

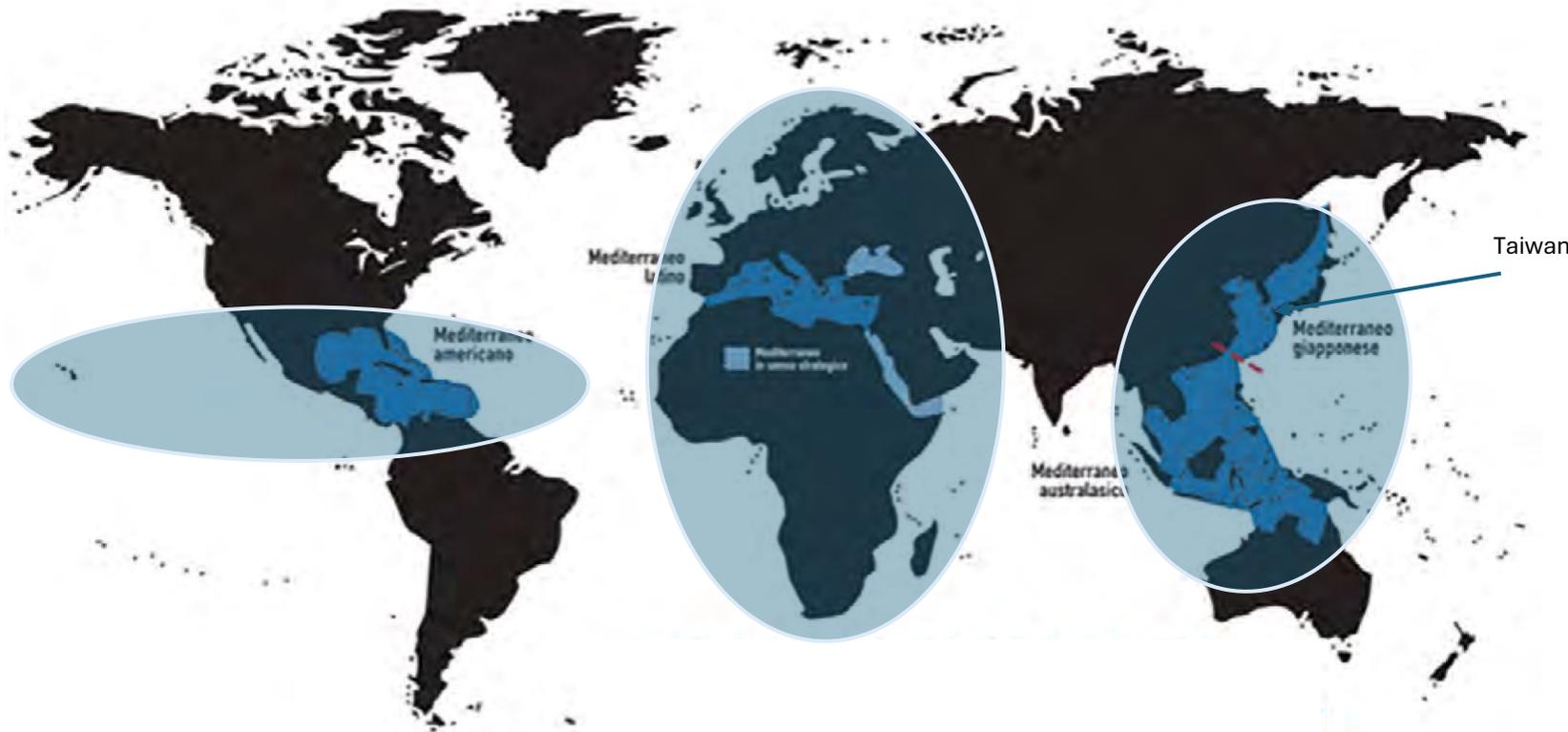


“Chi è in grado di influenzare il rimland è in grado di contenere l’heartland” cit. Spikeman



We therefore move from a geographical Mediterranean perspective (in which its appendages must also be considered) to a strategic Mediterranean perspective.

The areas of the strategic Mediterranean are areas that, for economic, political, military and other reasons, are particularly sensitive and subject to tension.



The Three Strategic Mediterraneans:

- 1) The Enlarged Mediterranean
- 2) The United Asian Mediterraneans
- 3) The Mesoamerican Mediterranean (Extending as far as Hawaii)

Definition of Thalassocracy

Thalassocracy is a form of political, economic and military power based on control and dominance of the seas and maritime routes. It occurs when a state, coalition or political entity exercises decisive influence over strategic maritime areas, ocean communication routes and maritime trade, thanks to a powerful naval fleet, strategic port infrastructure and a network of bases or support ports.

Historical examples: The Republic of Venice; The British Empire (WWII)

“The greatest modern writer on naval strategy.”
— *U. S. Navy Department, 1914*

THE
INFLUENCE
OF
SEA POWER
UPON
HISTORY

1660—1783

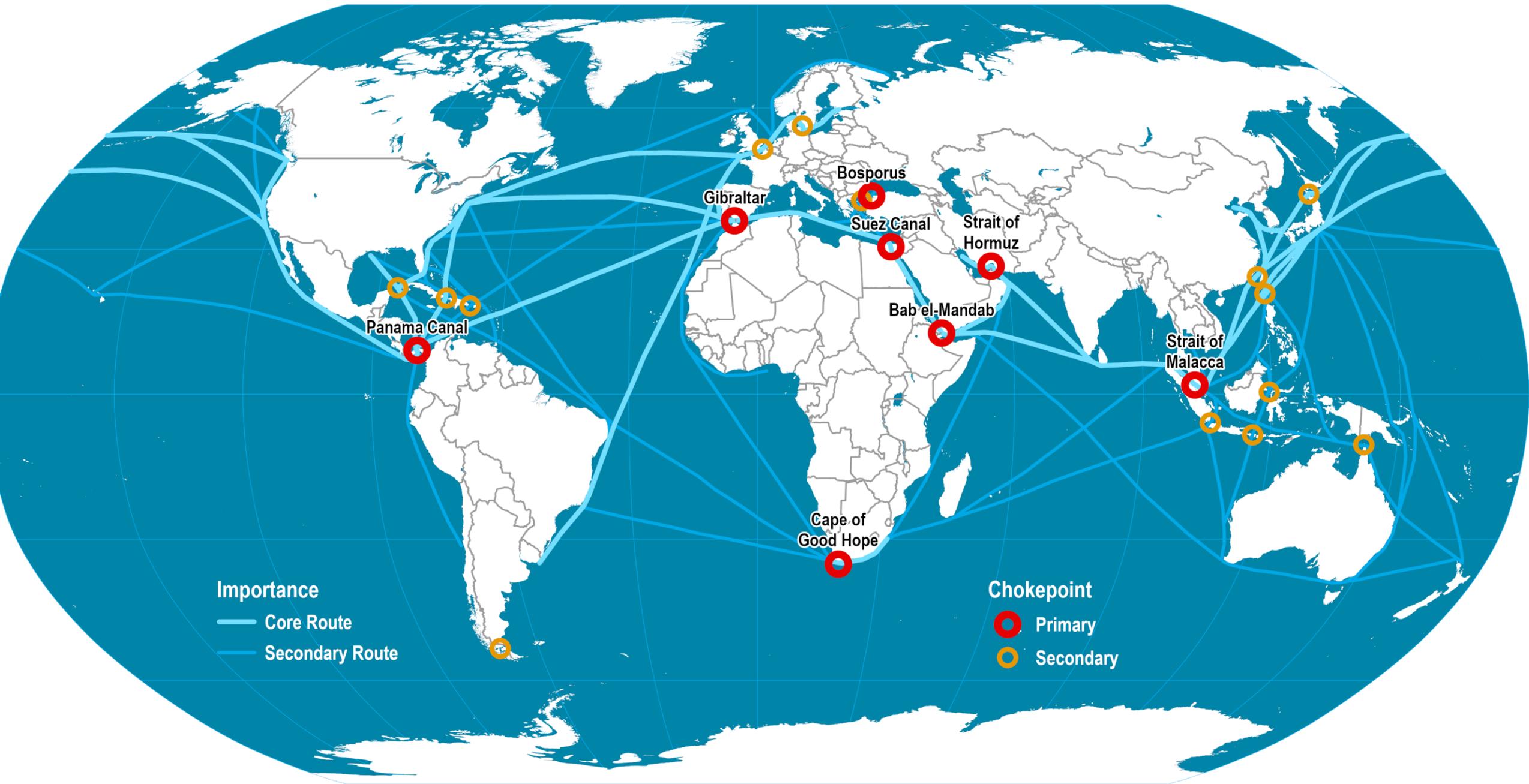
BY
ALFRED THAYER MAHAN

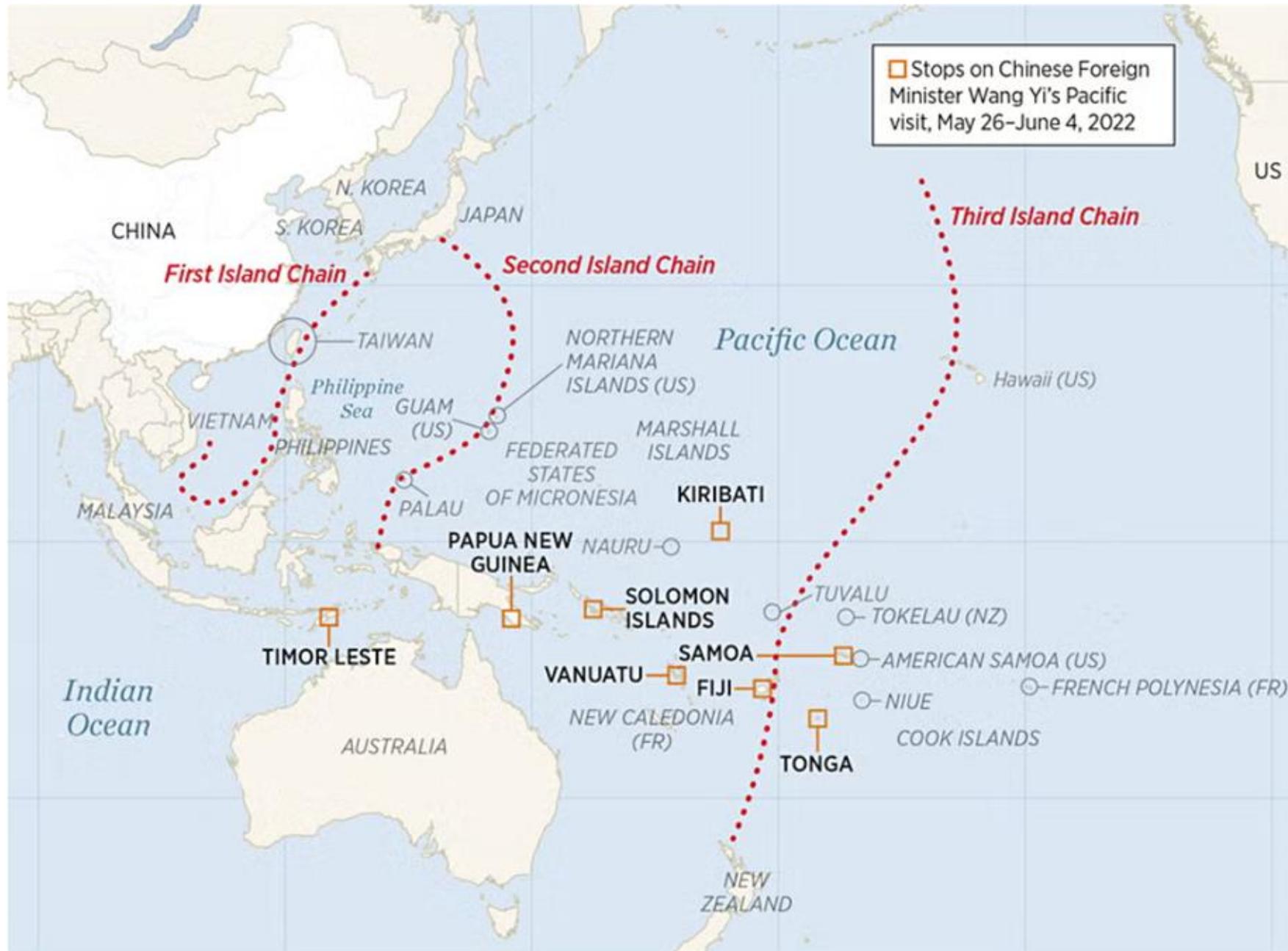
“The real father of all modern navies.”
— *Life, April, 1940*

The Mediterranean seas are the focus of interest for thalassocracies.

To control the Mediterranean, you must control its choke points.

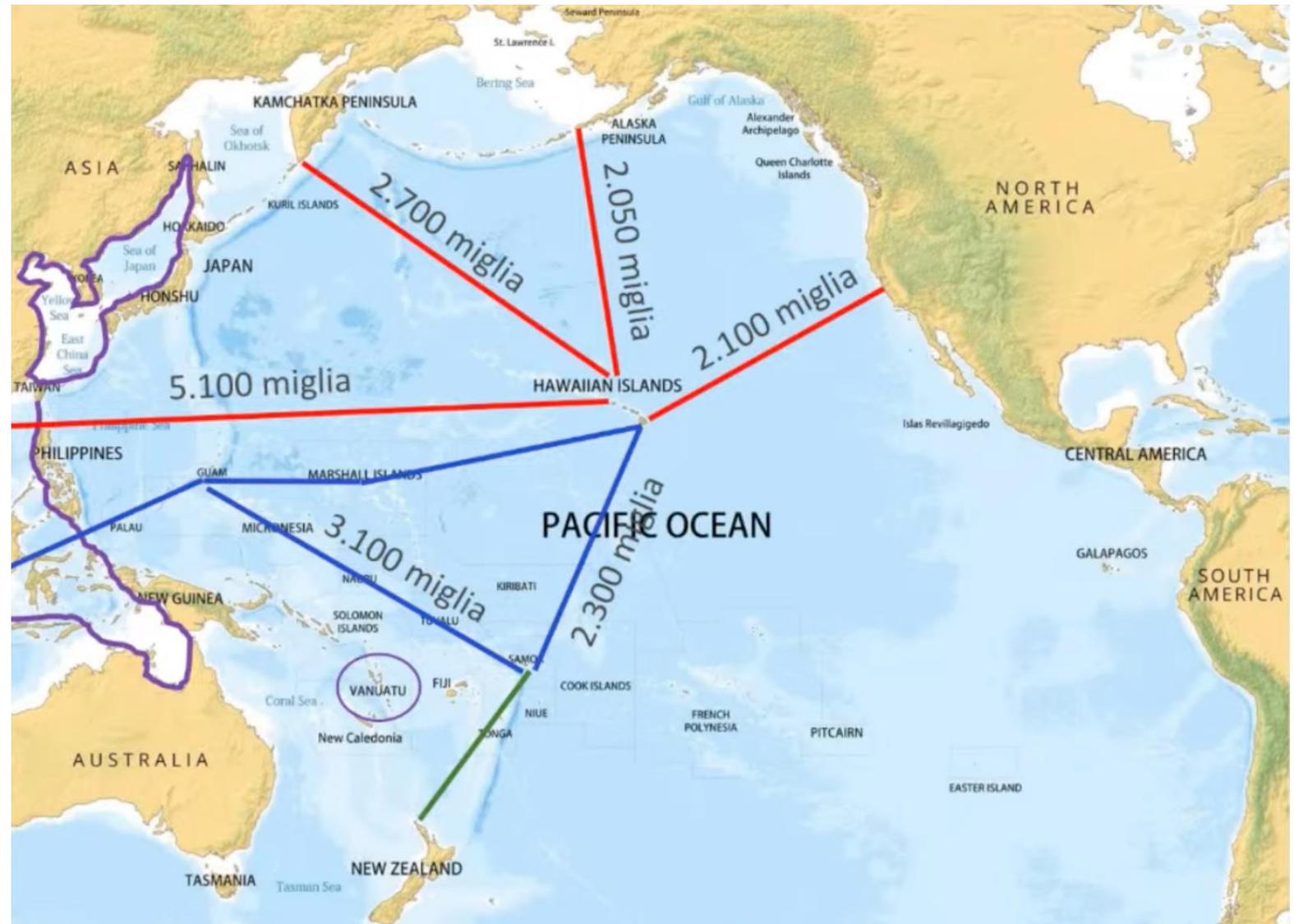
‘Whoever has the power to secure control of these maritime trade routes by preventing access to them by adversaries will be able to profoundly influence the very essence of their nation's strength’: Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*





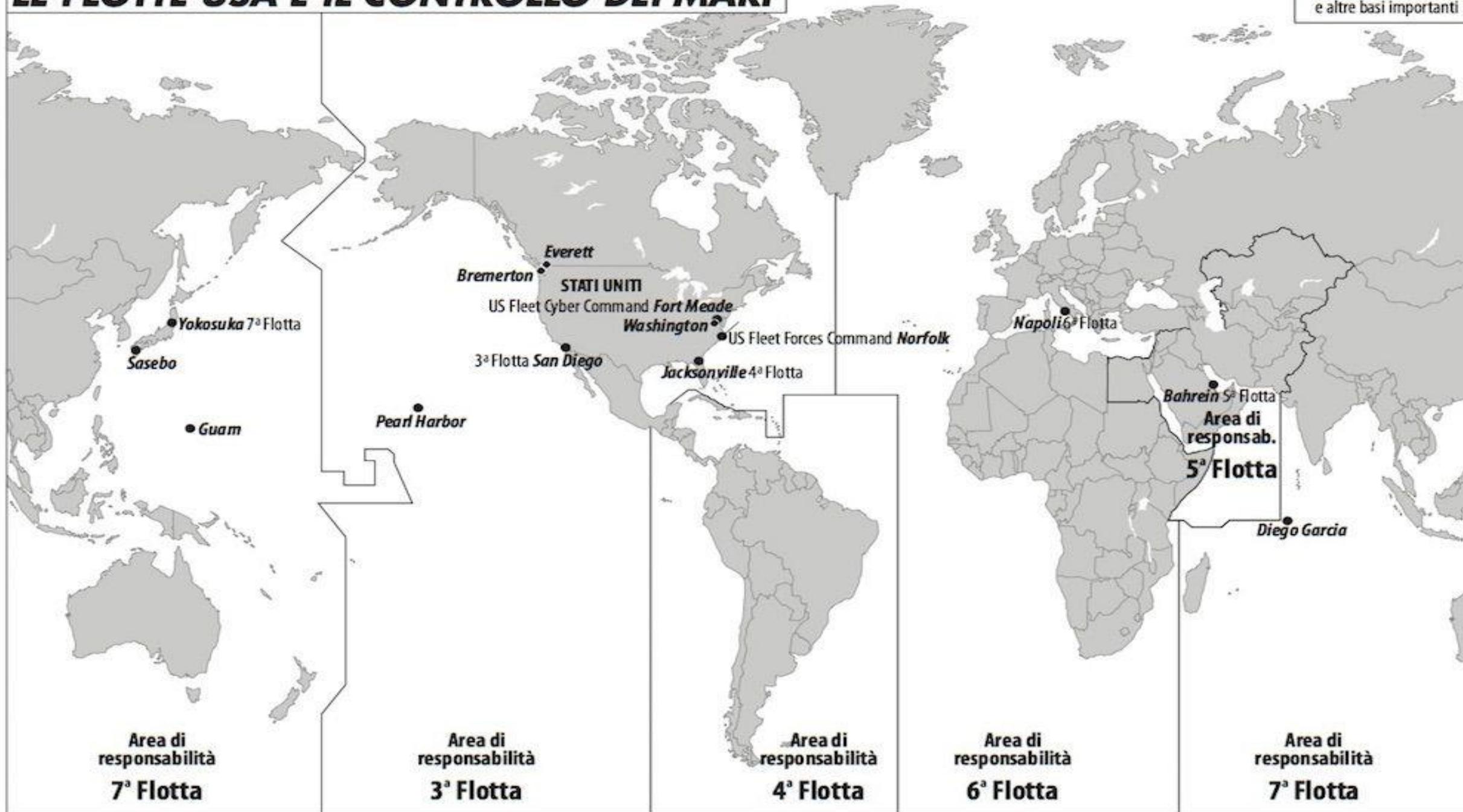
Therefore, in line with the Heartland and Rimland theories, the United States is controlling the positions flanking China, still applying Huntington's concepts. In this sense, there are outposts of an American encirclement of China, with presences in Japan, the Philippines, South Korea and Taiwan, which represent the bastions of the Heartland containment system.

‘If you control Hawaii, you can control the Pacific shipping lanes and thus control the Pacific Ocean.’ A.T. Mahan



LE FLOTTE USA E IL CONTROLLO DEI MARI

● Basi delle flotte e altre basi importanti



La Risposta cinese: Belt and Road Initiative

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a strategic economic and infrastructure cooperation programme launched by China in 2013, with the aim of creating a global network of land and sea connections to facilitate trade, investment and economic integration.

The project is divided into two main areas:

- Silk Road Economic Belt (land belt): rail, road and energy corridors connecting China to Central Asia, Russia, the Middle East and Europe.
- 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (maritime route): shipping routes connecting Chinese ports to Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean, East Africa and the Mediterranean.

The areas of intervention include:

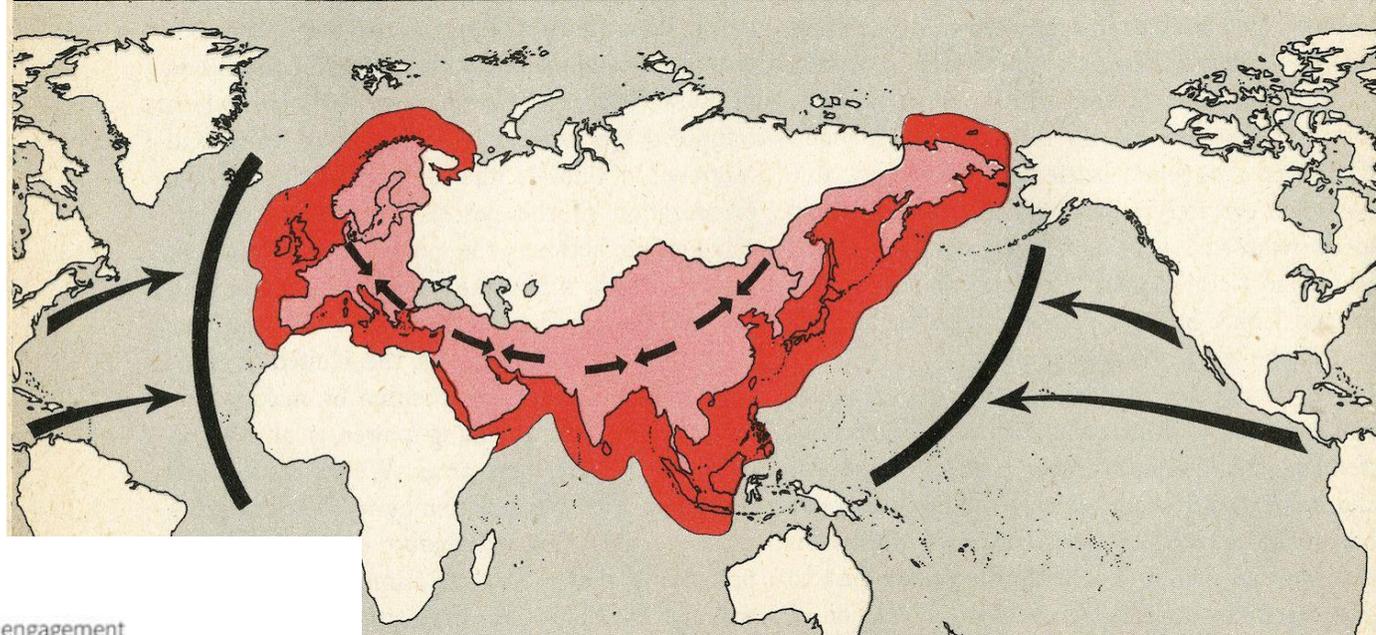
construction and modernisation of transport infrastructure (ports, railways, motorways, airports);

development of energy and digital networks;

promotion of trade agreements and foreign direct investment;

cultural, scientific and technological cooperation.

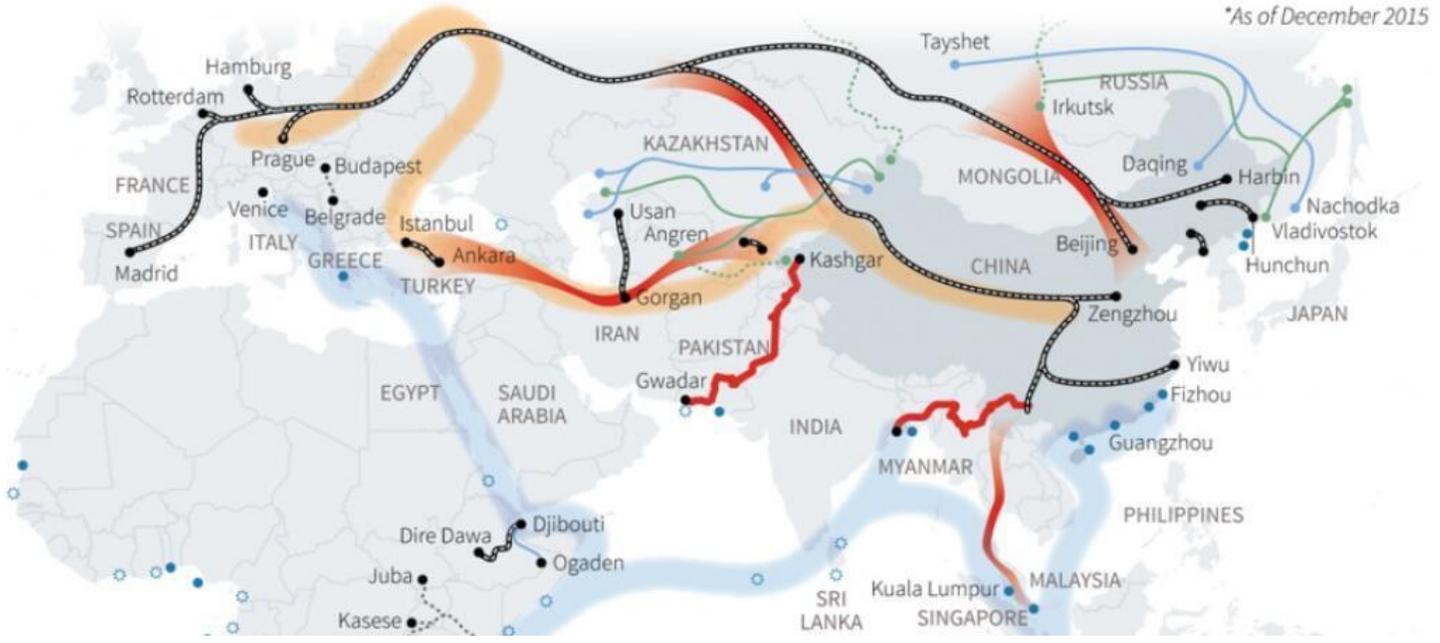
Has anyone studied Spykman?



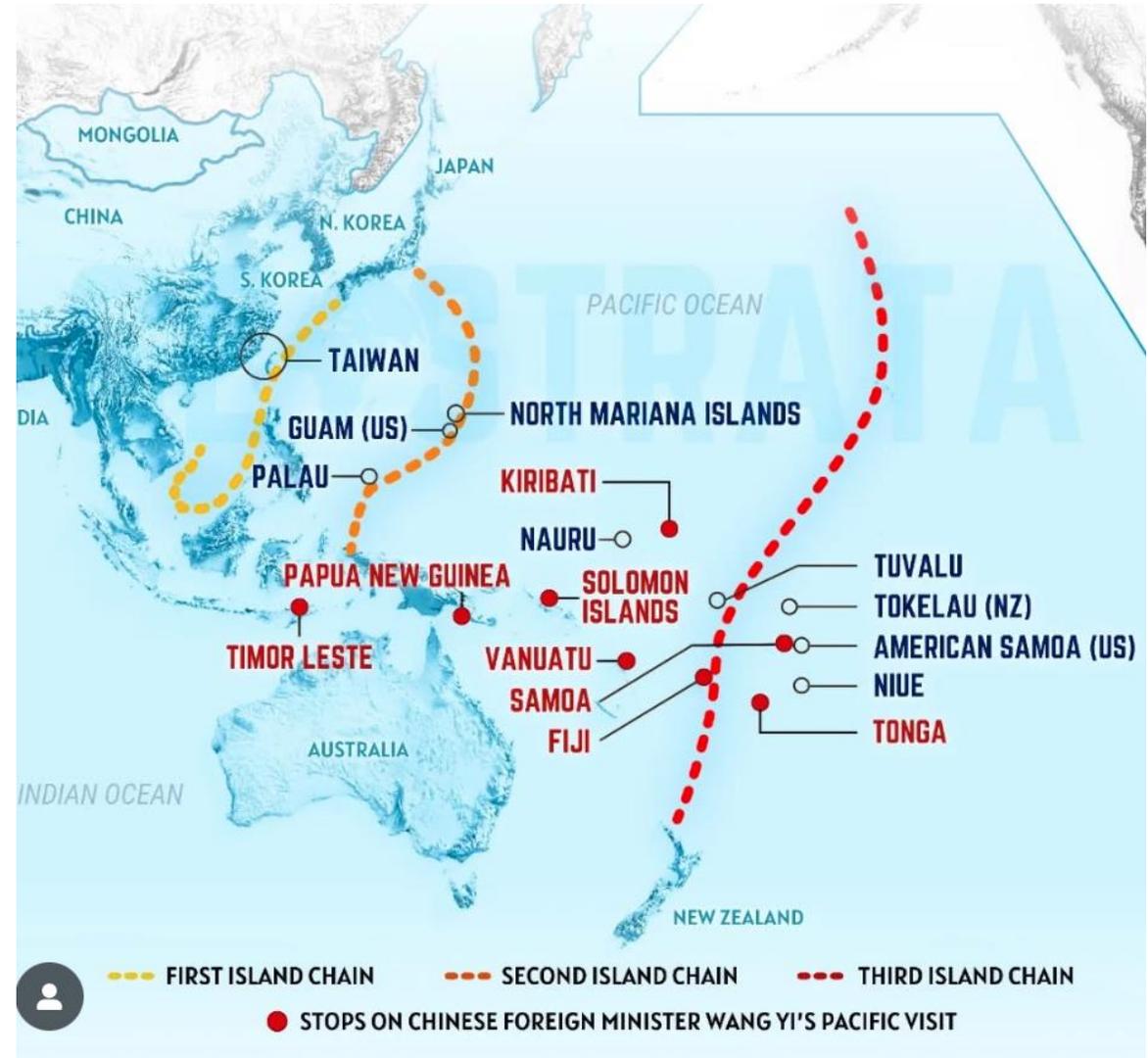
Key

- Silk Road Economic Belt
- New Maritime Silk Road
- Gas pipelines
- Oil pipelines
- Railroad
- Proposed economic corridors
- Ports with Chinese engagement
- Planned or under construction

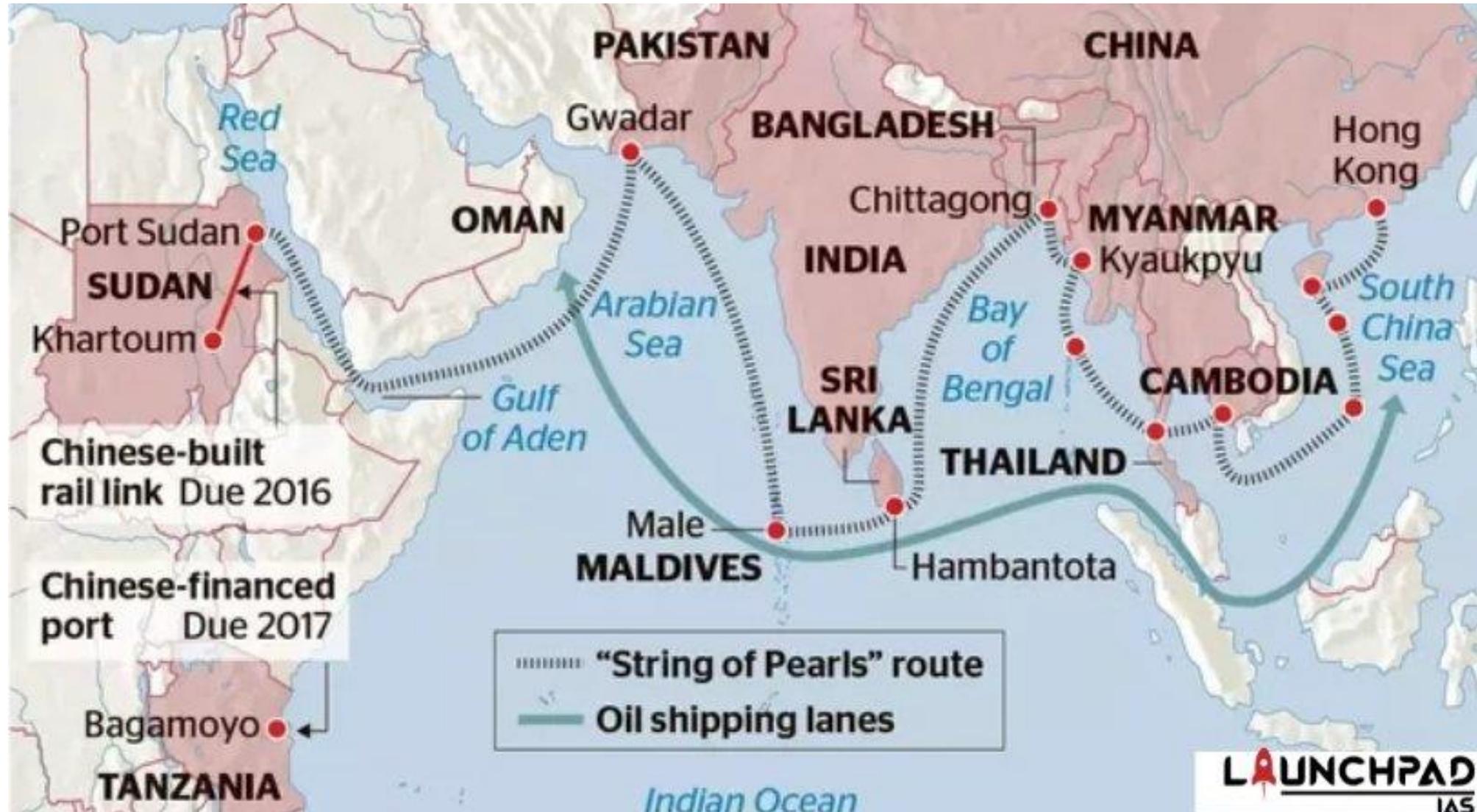
Projects subsumed under China's Belt and Road initiative



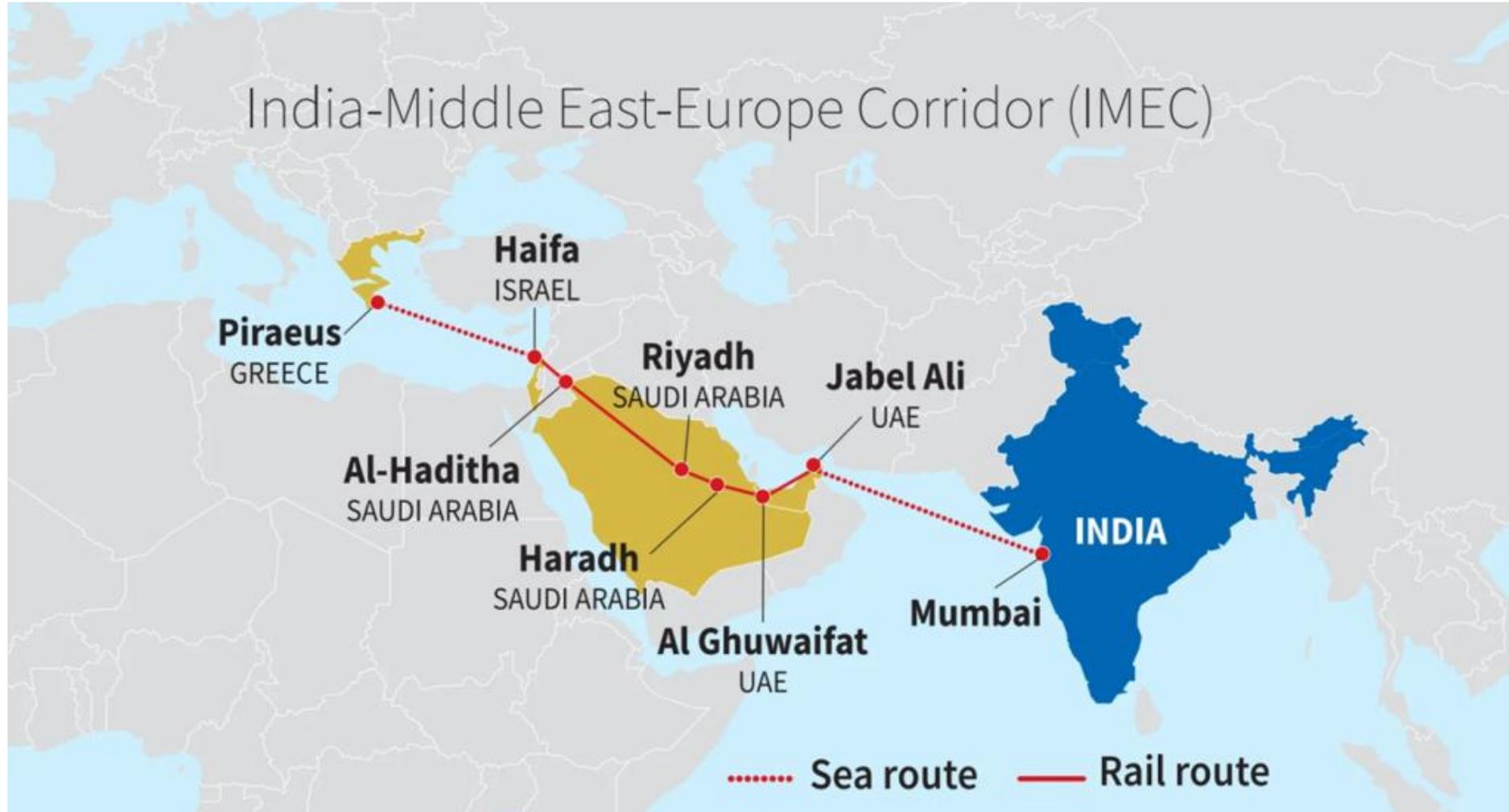
China's response to the chain of islands



The Chinese string of pearls



IMEC – India's response to the String of Pearls



Isn't something missing?



Three routes: Northwest Passage, Northeast Passage, transpolar route, in international waters.

Most promising route: NSR (Northern Sea Route – Russian coast).

From July to late October/early November.
CC = longer sailing periods (icebreakers still required).

Time savings: Yokohama-Rotterdam via Suez 31 days; via NSR 19; Shanghai-Rotterdam (29.22); Shanghai-Genoa (24.31)

Two main types of traffic: raw material exports from the Arctic to Europe; transit (alternative to Suez), currently of little significance



The geopolitical aspect of the Arctic Mediterranean

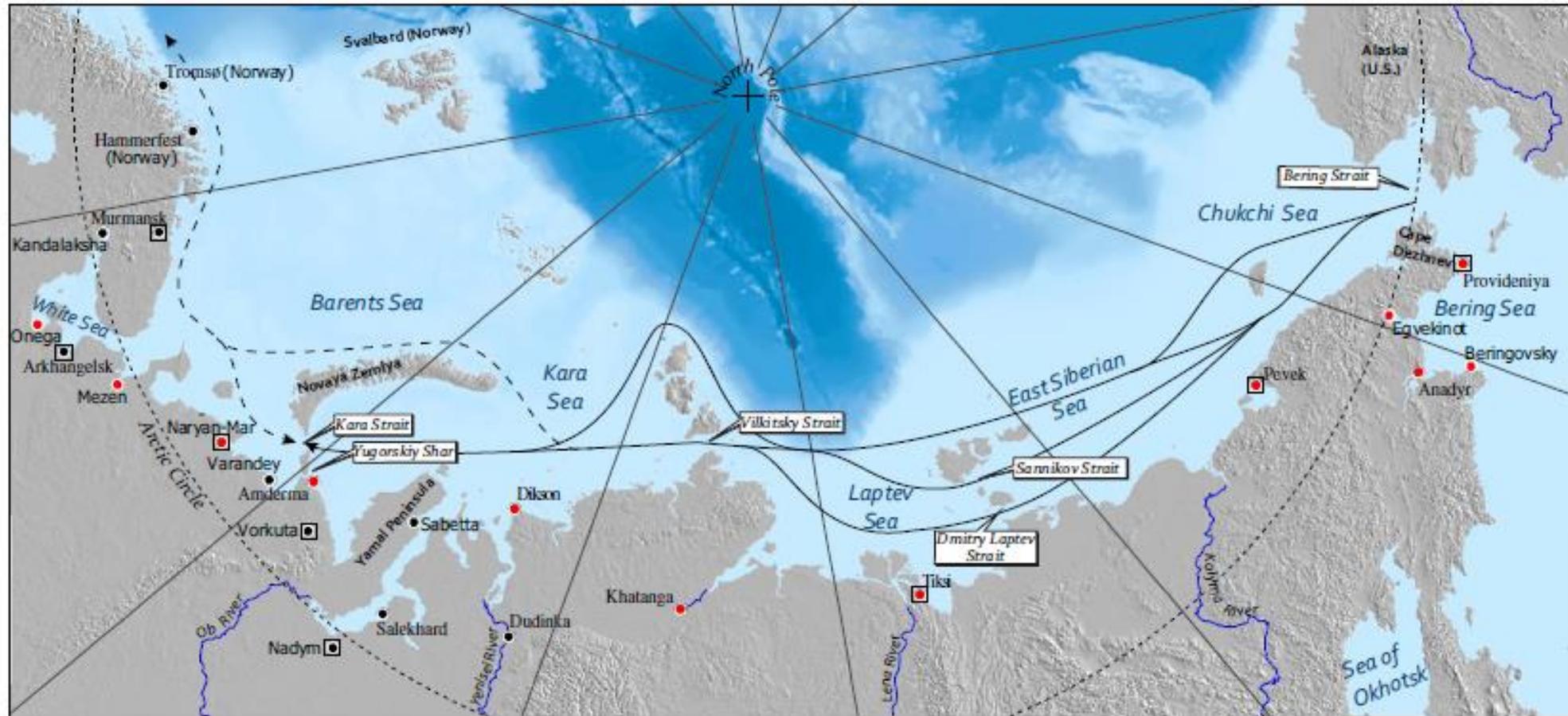
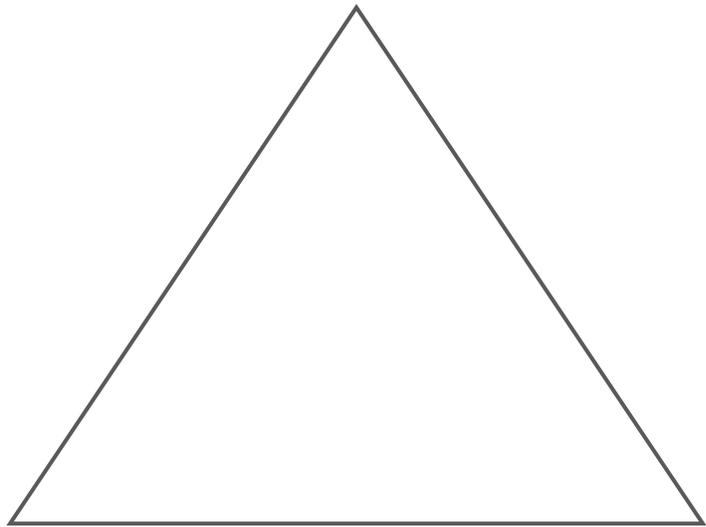


Figure 2. Map of the Russian and Norwegian Arctic coasts, showing the NSR (solid line) and its extension to the NEP (dotted line). Settlements in red have been identified by the Russian Government (FSUE 2013) as having port facilities in a state of disrepair. Planned SAR stations are also identified with a square (adapted from Stephenson *et al.* 2013a).

Maritime Safety

Interstate conflicts (Dispute in merito a confine, risorse, minacce ibride/Grey Zone)



Extremism
and terrorism

Blue Crime

Piracy

Smuggling (Commercio Petrolio e esseri umani)

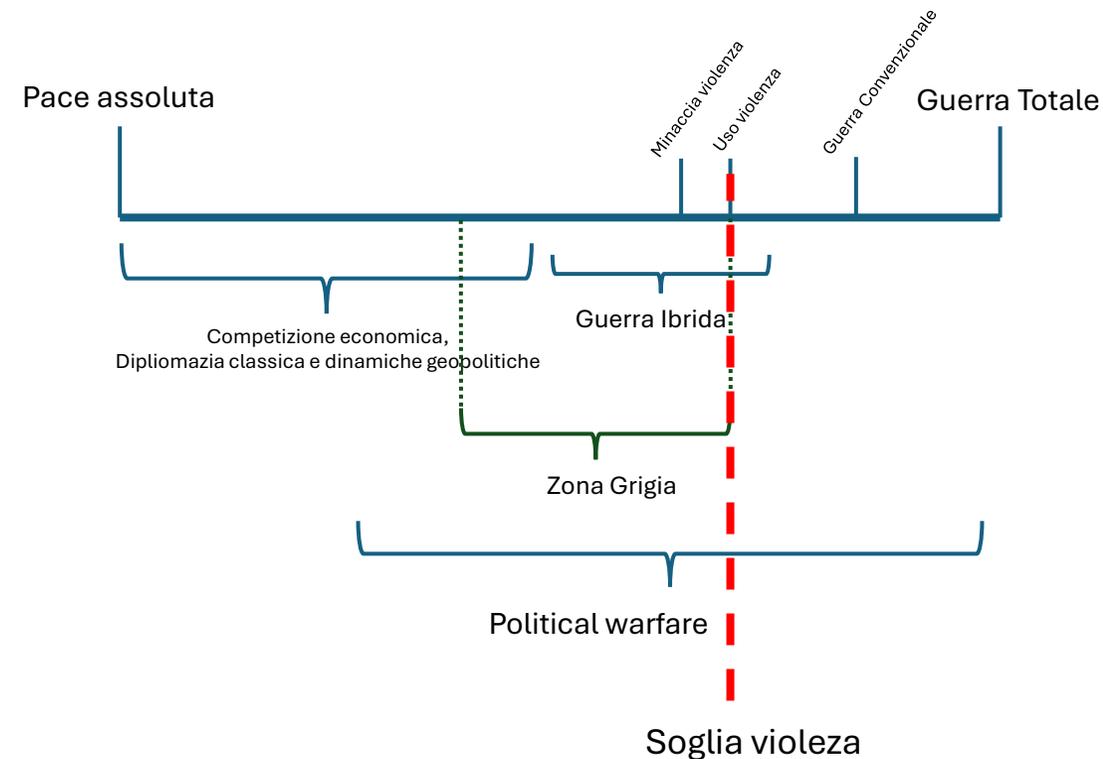
Environmental Crimes



The most serious threats are those concerning the famous choke points.

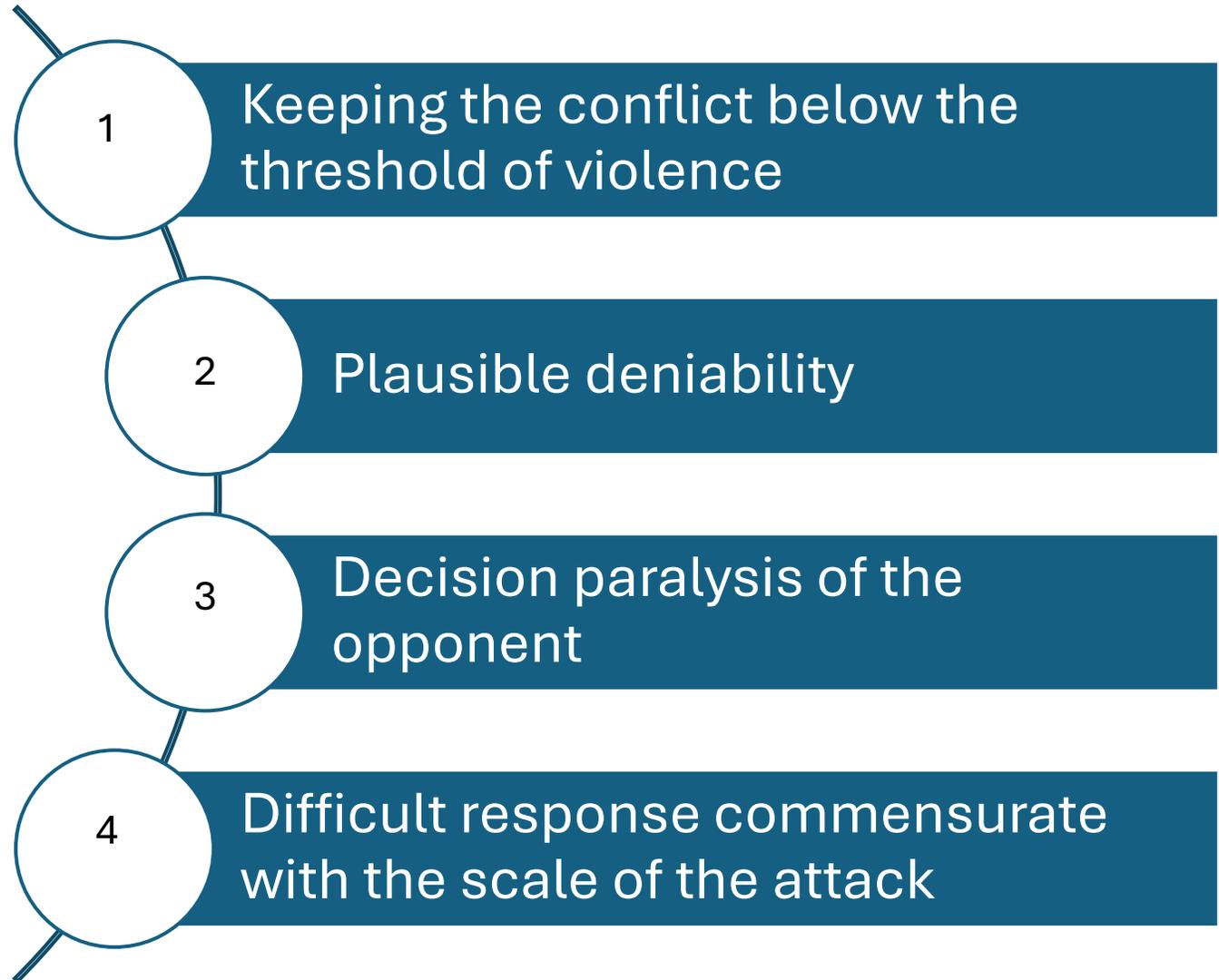
The threat of the Grey Zone

- The grey zone is that area between peace and war, where Russia and China are particularly ruthless
- Between absolute peace and total war there is a grey zone characterised by a series of competitive acts, the most important of which take place below the threshold of violence
- These actions remain below the level of conflict, even though they involve military force



The threat of the Grey Zone

- The purpose of actions in the grey area is to make it difficult to determine the potential response to those who suffer these attacks.
- Actions in the grey area always fall within the framework of plausible deniability, i.e., those who commit them leave no traces and it is not easy to identify the culprit.



Some examples: Hydrographic ocean vessels in the Arctic and the Gulf of Bengal

Yantar (Project 22010):

Officially a Russian Navy oceanographic research vessel.

Equipped with mini-submarines and underwater drones to map the seabed, lay or intercept sensors and submarine cables.

2022–2023: detected near Norwegian underwater energy infrastructure and Arctic gas pipelines (NATO intelligence refers to “technical reconnaissance for possible future sabotage”).

Russian hydrographic research vessels (Project 864 and variants):

Officially engaged in environmental studies, but actually equipped with high-definition sonar to map the seabed, identify areas suitable for nuclear submarines and position sensors.

Shi Yan 6 (2023):

Research vessel belonging to the Chinese Academy of Sciences, sent to Sri Lanka and the Bay of Bengal.

India has expressed strong concern, suspecting that the mission was to collect bathymetric data useful to PLA Navy submarines for future operations.

Equipped with towed sonar and autonomous underwater vehicles (AUVs) capable of creating 3D maps of the seabed.

Yuan Wang 5: Suspected Chinese spy ship docked in Hambantota (Sri Lanka) after weeks of operations in the Indian Ocean, suspected of monitoring Indian missile tests and mapping submarine routes.

Some examples : Shadow Fleet



Some examples : Kerch Bridge



Some examples : *MV Saviz & MV Behshad*



DATI DI VIAGGIO	
Destinazione	-
? Destinazione non disponibile	-
ETA:	-
ETA prevista	-
Distanza / Tempo	-
Direzione / Velocità	350.6° / 0.0 kn
Pescaggio attuale	7.1 m
Stato di navigazione	-
Posizione ricevuta	129 days ago i
IMO / MMSI	9167289 / 422036200
Callsign	EPBW3
Tipo AIS	Cargo ship
Bandiera AIS	Iran
Lunghezza / Larghezza	174 / 26 m
Ultimo porto	Bandar Abbas Anch., Iran
	ATA: Apr 28, 14:21 UTC (175 days ago)

 Track on Map

 Aggiungi foto

 Aggiungi alla flotta

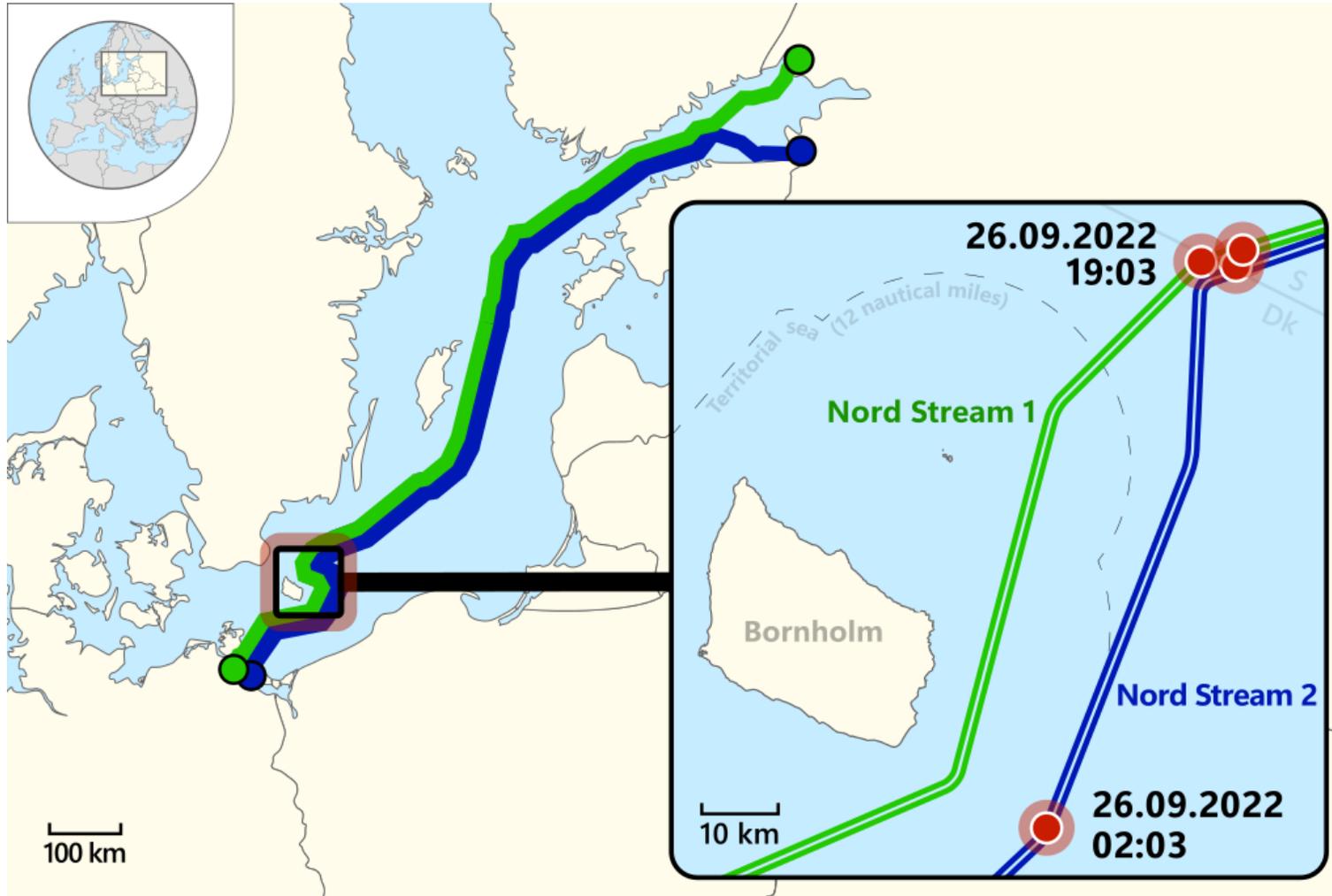
POSIZIONE NAVE E METEO



Some examples : *Milizia Marittima*



Some examples : Damage to Nord Stream



Some examples: Data cables between Estonia and Finland have been cut



La nave “new new polar bear” ha erroneamente trascinato l’ancora sul fondo

Thank you for your attention.