

**CHINA'S STRING OF PEARLS STRATEGY:  
IMPLICATIONS TO JAPAN IN THE STRAITS OF  
MALACCA**

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**Abstract**

China has been using the Straits of Malacca as its main route for importing raw materials and exporting its products. Due to its position on the Straits of Malacca as a main route for trading ships, China is very concerned about the maritime security in the Straits because of non-traditional crimes such as maritime piracy, smuggling and terrorism. What are the actions taken by China based on the String of Pearls strategy and its implications towards Japan? This paper will attempt to explain the mechanisms taken by China to protect its national interests in the Straits of Malacca between 2005 and 2012. It has three objectives: namely 1) to describe the importance of the Straits of Malacca to China; 2) to discuss the String of Pearls strategy in the Straits of Malacca; and 3) to discuss the implications of the String of Pearls strategy towards Japan. This study will use both primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected from structured interviews involving ten informants in various professional fields that are directly involved in maritime security in the Straits of Malacca. Secondary data was collected from literature reviews based on scientific publications, theses, journal articles, and online material, such as newspaper articles. Primary data was also obtained from professional respondents from abroad through electronic media such as email. The findings of this study show that, to protect its national interests, China has had to modernize its military capabilities, especially its naval power, as well as to strengthen diplomatic ties with the littoral states.

**Keywords: China, Defence, Japan; Straits of Malacca; String of Pearls.**

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## 1.0 Introduction

China is a country that is not quite standing out in a few decades. This is because China would prefer to be in the home zone. Basically China emphasizes three things which make the continuity of the regime, territorial integrity and stability in the country (Pehrson 2006, p4). Over the last few years, China has begun its rapid economic development and has surpassed Japan as the Asia economic centre in 2010. After opening its market in the 1970s, China's economy continued to show sustained growth. Even after joining the World Trade organization (WTO) in 2001, China's economy continued to grow up to become a selection of Western countries to build a plant and operating centres in the East.

As a large country with many natural resources and workforce, make China among the countries that have great potential to grow in line with Western countries. Though it has its own resources but China still depends on imports for oil through the Straits of Malacca at 85 per cent and 80 per cent includes the total imports in a scale (Umaña 2012, p14). Rapid development occurred causing a request for source energy. Energy sources that have high demand in China are petroleum and gas. In 2009, China needs a total of 8.3 million barrel per day of energy sources. But China only managed to meet the needs in the country by producing 4.0 million barrel per day only. Because of many requirements, China has imported a total of 4.5 million barrel per day external energy source (EIA 2010).

The shifting economic centre in Asia from Japan to China has made China as an important hub of Commerce and communication in world (Ahn 2004, p24). This has encouraged foreign investors to get into the country. Investment in China is more convenient since the country began to adopt a policy of open doors and allow investors to open factories and operations. Due to the inclusion of many investors in some sectors such as manufacturing, manufacturing and industry, making a request to energy sources increased every year. China's sustainable economic growth over the past 30 years have led China to a level which is very commendable where it has managed to become a world power that has economic and military

unprecedented in the history of the modern world (Patel 2009, p8). China not only managed to get out of the country zone but has opened the eyes of the world community that it is not impossible that a country is only at formerly isolated rose to highlight.

## 2.0 Importance of the Straits of Malacca to China

**Importation in large-scale is made to meet the needs of the country.** China's energy needs are obtained from various countries in Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia (Lai 2007). Among oil exporters to China are Angola, Sudan, Congo, Gabon, Venezuela, Arab Saudi, Iran, Yemen, Oman, Indonesia, Brunei and Malaysia. However, this source of energy demand has resulted in China depending on the passage in the Straits of Malacca. This dependency is called “Malacca dilemma” by the President of China, Hu Jintuo (Chen 2010, p2). The dependence on the Straits of Malacca can actually cause any unsafe condition to China if something happened in the Strait in the future, such as maritime security threats or blockade from any party.

The Sea lanes of China's energy route



Map 1

Source: modified from the USA DefenseDepartment Annual Report 2007

Map 1 shows the route taken by ships carrying petroleum products to China from the Middle East through the Indian Ocean, the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea before reaching home. The high demand for energy sources has led China to change strategy and its external policy to the outside world. Because of this, China has taken steps to improve security along the international maritime route, especially in the Straits of Malacca. Due to these factors, China had offered assistance and military cooperation in the form of the Littoral States (DoD 2007). Although the Straits of Malacca is often used by alternative routes such as the Sunda Straits and Lombok Straits (it is still being used to carry goods by VLCC (Very Large Crude Carriers).

According to Zhou (2008), the rise of China's economy should not be feared by other countries especially USA and Japan as its growth from the point of economics is to guarantee the needs of its people. Having a large population demands that require the Chinese Government to re-arrange its strategy so that it will meet the people's needs. The fall of Chinese's economy must be feared by many countries, especially developing countries. Nowadays, a lot of foreign companies are investing and develop processing factory in China because of cheap labour. The collapse of the Chinese's economy will certainly large recession in the world history because China is one of the world's largest economic contributors.

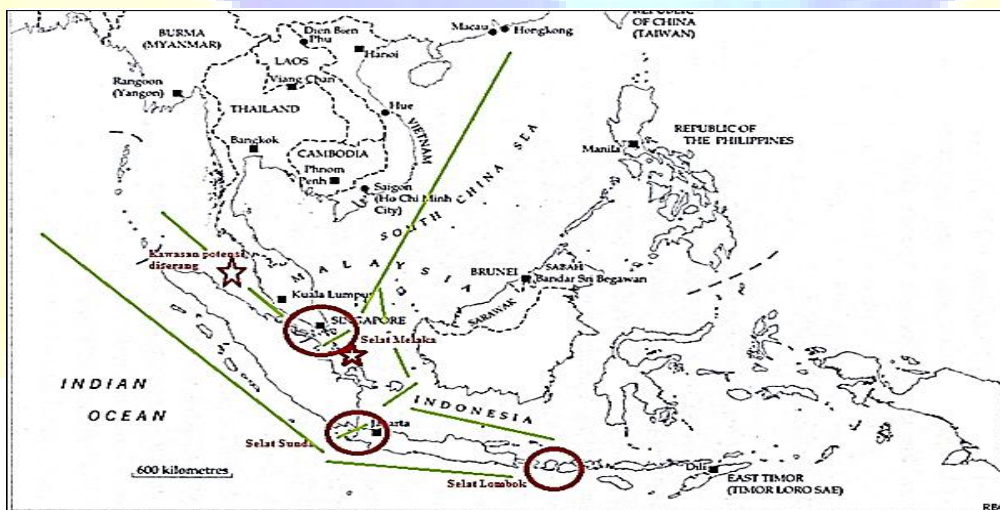
**Due to energy source factors, Chinese foreign policy had changed a little bit as adjustment in the international system** (Yu 2008, p1). Dependence on external resource is not secure because the price of oil had changing. Not only that, the race within the imported countries also high. One of China's initiatives to reduce dependency on imports is to get the oil exploration concessions in certain countries. China through its oil companies such as Petro China, Sinopec, Sinochem and CNOOC were seeking oil exploration concessions outside of China to increase the supply in the country. For example China has made smart constellation when in 2002, China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC), China's State-owned company successfully had the concession oil and gas company Repsol-YPF in Indonesia costs \$ 585 million (Mokhzani 2004). Shortly thereafter, the Chinese oil company again succeeded in bidding for the assets of Devon Energy Corporation is also located in Indonesia worth \$ 262 million. This situation actually gives another advantage to China because indirectly it is monitoring the situation in the Straits of Malacca. Investment in Indonesia will reduce the cost of travel ship because Indonesia



is closer to China than in the Middle East. According to Zhang (2006) energy source's factor such as oil have greatly changed the foreign policy of China as it should make this constellation so that the supply of oil is going. The lack of such resources can cripple the China's economy, which is currently being turned into industrial nation.

**In addition to reducing the dependence on countries in Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia, China has been working with some of its neighbours to build a pipeline to channel resources to the home.** China has been working with Kazakhstan to build a pipeline along the 30,088 km from Atyrau to Dushangzhi and from Atasu to Alashankou (Lai 2007). Similar cooperation has also been initiated with Kyrgyzstan since 2004. In addition to the two countries, China import oil from Myanmar. According to Fisher Jr (2010) China has a dream to make a pipeline from Myanmar continued to drop across the Indo-China countries, so that it will be easier to meet in the Straits of Malacca. The importance of resources to the economic survival of China clearly showed the main reason China acted as one of the important global economic actor. Construction of the pipeline is important as an alternative route for energy resources to China if something happened in the Straits of Malacca(Cronim& Kaplan 2012, p12).

China Strategic route



----- Energy sources route

Map 2

Source: modified from WWW.Middlebury.edu (2013)

Map 2 shows the main routes using by China. Straits of Malacca became the most important route to China. If the northern part (star marked) of Straits of Malacca attacked by pirates or terrorist, China can still use an alternative route i.e. Sunda Straits and Lombok Straits. But it will add to the cost and travel time. In 2002, a total of 16 cases of attack in Straits of Malacca was noted and it was reduced to 12 cases of attacks in 2005 (the Marine Department 2013). This situation actually shows the existence of a threat even though the amount is very small (around 0.025 per cent) but it involves the lost of properties and possible loss of life. Maritime crime occurred affecting the shipping industry and the economy as it will cause a delay in the delivery of resources where it will also increased insurance premiums.

**Maritime security factor especially during through the Straits of Malacca is given attention by China.** Maritime threats, such as robbery and piracy are a problem that can cause the lack of supply of energy sources where it also could cripple the economy of China. Therefore prevent the occurrence of this incident is better to reduce the risk of loss. After the World Trade Centre (WTC) in the USA was attacked on 11 September 2001, many countries began to caution with this terrorist attack. Maritime security is also enhanced in all routes deemed potentially attacked. In 2006, Lloyd of London listed the Straits of Malacca as risky areas attacked by terrorist (Weitz 2008, p96). This situation makes China as a one of main user felt responsible to help the Littoral States to enhance the maritime security in this straits.

**The threat of maritime crime nowadays sometimes could not be expected because of the sophistication of the technology in line with the level of usage of new technologies by criminals became high.** For example in 2002, the ship namely- MT *Nautical Kluang* (Malaysia), which carries diesel fuel was attacked near the island of Iyu (South of the Straits of Malacca) by armed attackers using speedboats, while in 2005 the Ship- *Suhaila* which bought the carry chemical products have been attacked in the East Aceh by attackers using AK47 rifle (Sabirin 2007, p141). This shows there is a gap in the security aspect in some areas deemed vulnerable by threats and lack of attention by the Littoral States.

**Strategy and military factors was a third factor which worries China. China concerned about the possibility of Sino-United States Conflict where the sanctions against imports of China's oil from the Middle East might be affected** (Blair, Chen & Hagt 2006). This is because USA has a close relationship with India. USA can prevent the movement of China's ship

with the assistance of India which has a base on the Island of Andaman and Nicobar. Although China is not planning to fight but it need to prepare for any possibility attack. From economy perspective, China, USA and India is an important trading partner but in terms of political, these countries still suspicion each other and There is no denying its strategic position on the Straits of Malacca attracted the interest of many countries. In 2003, President Hu Jintao gave a statement that Japan, USA and India are actually just want to control the Straits of Malacca by using new strategies to obscure the eyes of the international community. Because this problem, a China newspaper has issued a statement that:

*“It is no exaggeration to say that whoever controls the Strait of Malacca will also have a stranglehold on the energy route of China” - China Youth Daily, June 15, 2004*

Source: Storey 2007

This statement gives a view that if other users can be around the Straits of Malacca because of concern to protect the security of the Straits, why China cannot do the same thing. China was concerned on the restrictions which may be imposed to its country so that it cannot treat this situation as a small problem. Restrictions can be made at any time no matter in meantime and war time (Potter 2012). For China, Japan, USA and India had used the terrorist threat as a reason to be in the Straits of Malacca. Although the cases reported in the Straits of Malacca are actually very few in comparison to other straits.

China has seriously concerned the presence of India in Andaman and Nicobar Islands. This is because the archipelago is the entrance to the Straits of Malacca. For China, the Indian Navy action is near the waters of the Straits of Malacca and its Look East Policy is actually a negative sign because China tanker will serve as the subject or actor for the country (Mokhzani 2004). Because of these reasons, China has to have a little control over the Straits of Malacca then it will reduce the concern over the possibility of sabotage activities against its ships.

China is increasing its military capabilities primarily navy because of three factors, namely economic, maritime security and strategic (Hamzah 2008). China has importing a lot of energy sources from Africa and the Middle East Countries through the Indian Ocean then across the Straits of Malacca and leading to the South China Sea. Therefore, it is very relevant for China

to use a sophisticated naval ship as a SAR activities or chasing pirates. This is because according to reports issued by ReCAAP in 2012, most pirates currently have speed boat and are equipped with weapons such as M16, rifle beside the knife and cleaver. They also have expertise in handling large ship and capable in martial arts. Although the number of attacked at this time is very minimal but China want to get ready to deal with the threat.

According to Atanassova- Cornelis (2010), the increasing number of Japan military assets gives a different perspective to China. Even when the Japanese adding its Self-Defence Forces (SDF) missions in the sea, make China think that Japan try to get a better influence in Southeast Asia. However, China does not want to show that the country has the ability and dreams to be a threat to other countries. In 2007, President Wen Jiabao has stated that other countries should not fear of China's growing military budget as it is a common process undertaken by many countries to replace the old asset to the new asset that is more sophisticated.

**China's defence budget has increased every year since the year 2001 amounting USD 17.00 billion, USD 22.4 billion in 2003, USD 29.9 billion in 2005 and USD 45.0 billion in 2007** (Fisher Jr 2010). In 2012, the country's defence budget is valued at USD 96.3 billion (Digest 2013). The military budget issued by China seen very high compared to other Asian Countries. But the increasing budget maybe because of its territories are huge and its meet the needs of every single base.

### **3.0 String of Pearls Strategy in the Straits of Malacca**

**For the first time in 2004, India called China's strategy as a String of Pearls. Rehman (2010) argues this strategy refers to the expansion of China's influence in Asia.** This strategy is a mechanism to building network of economic and military from the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea. It started by increasing access to the airports and ports. But this strategy will more focusing on the sea where it connects several major Straits in the world such as the Straits of Mandeb, Strait of Hormuz, Straits of Malacca and the Lombok Straits. This strategy also involves used of maritime assets in the strategic location like Maldives, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan.



China stated that this strategy is not to compete with anybody but more to secure its national interest. As issued by President Hu Jin Tao as saying that China increasing military strength particularly naval is to protect its energy source path in the Indian Ocean and lead to the Straits of Malacca (China defence 2013). More than that, China has no desire to control the entire ocean in the sea. The attentive attitude shown by China still caused different reactions from its neighbours as they already have some maritime boundary overlaps crisis before.

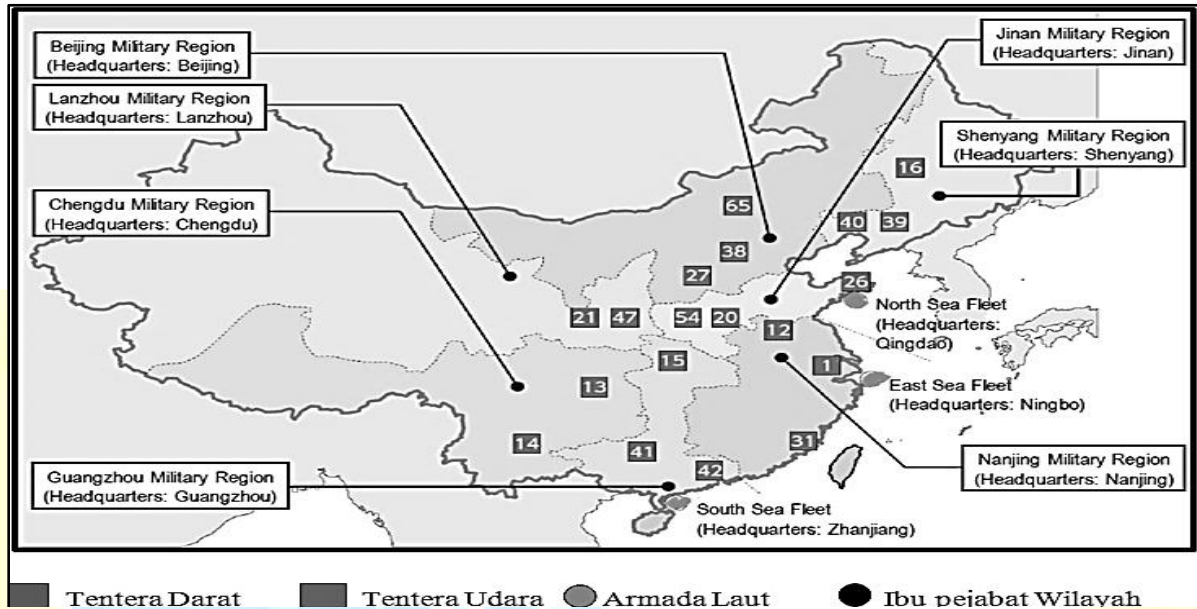


Map 3

Source: Modified from Google map (2014)

Map 3 shows the area around Asia that becomes a focus by China. Actually it's more to the China's energy security route. Although having the Indian Navy and US base around the Straits but it is not the reason for China to release the hand from its own national interests. This is because China is dependent on the sea for trade up to achieve a level of 80 per cent. From the strategic angle, this strategy will increase the integrity of China's diplomatic relations with its trading partner because the military presence will provide positive effects such as being able to reduce pirate and terrorist attacks against ships. But for the countries which adopted a different ideology, China seems as to dominate the area around Hindi Ocean through Straits of Malacca and South China Sea.

Defence of China

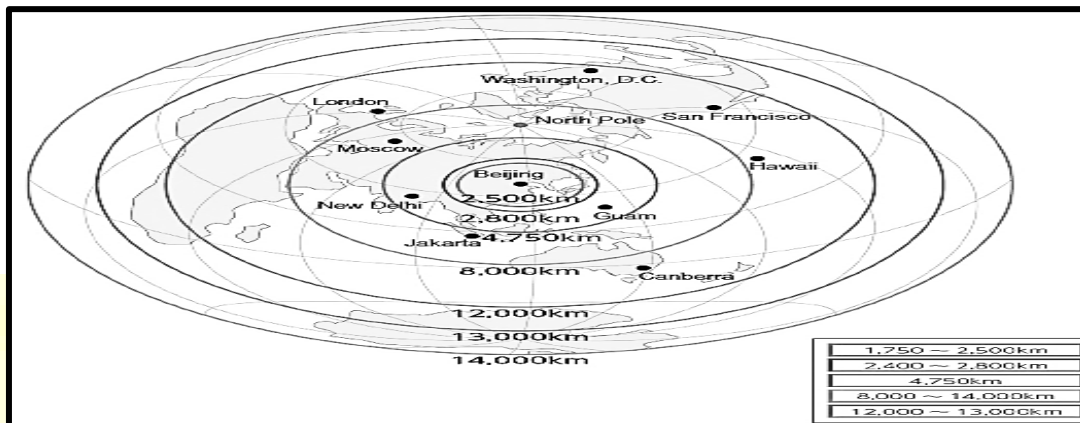


Map 4

Source: modified from Digest 2013

Map 4 shows the China defence capability around its own country. Until the year 2012, China has an army capability consists of 1.6 million people and 8200 of the tank. For the strength of the air force, China has 405 fighter jets (Sukhoi) and 2580 combat aircraft. The Chinese Navy has 10,000 members, 970 warships, 80 destroyer's ships and 60 submarines. China has military bases almost in every region. Because of many areas in China covered by land more than the ocean, the number of its army are more than the Navy. The Navy has three large bases that are in the region of Qindao (North), Ningbo (Middle East) and Zhanjiang (South). Three of these bases are located in strategic area where if there is any potential attacked, the assets that are placed along the maritime boundaries can be mobilized quickly. China can easily keep an eye on the area around the Straits of Malacca and the South China.

## China's Missile Strength



Map 5

Source: Digest 2013

Map 5 shows the access level of the missiles owned by China. As a country which is increasing its military assets, the missile is one of the important weapons owned by China at the present time. For example, the attacks made from Beijing can reach up to 14,000km which exceed the distance to Australia. The nearest distance to target by missile is about 1,750 miles. Based on the map, if China aiming its missiles to 4,500km, it is able to destroy countries around the Straits of Malacca.. Japan, USA and India become so worried about this increasing because if china prepared to use its missile, the mass destruction will be occurs. Even though China never use its assets yet, but it's aggressive actions toward some crisis like in Scarborough Shoal and Senkeku Island gave some view that China will use if necessary.

#### 4.0 Implications of String of Pearls Strategy to Japan

There are several implications of China String Pearls strategy of toward Japan. **The first is competition in enhancing military assets between China- Japan.** As a neighbouring country that is often plagued by maritime boundaries issues, the increased assets by China gave uneasy feeling toward Japan. This is because the history shown that the battle between the two countries provided many lessons to be more vigilant. According to Satoru (2013), the international community should not underestimated China military capability. This is because China often bums the territory which is not belonging to it. For example in 2004, the China submarine (has

nuclear weapons) has entered Japan's maritime borders. In 2008, China has conducted a series of military exercises in the Pacific Ocean, adjacent to Japanese waters. It was an early signal to Japan to be cautious and circumspect about the rise of China.

Table 1: Japan and China Military assets in 2013

CATEGORIES	JAPAN	CHINA
<i>Aircraft Carrier</i>	0	2
<i>Helicopter Carrier (Anti- submarine)</i>	4	0
<i>Destroyer, Frigate, Corvette</i>	44	78
<i>Submarine</i>	22	71
<i>Anti- submarine Patrol Aircraft</i>	80	4
<i>Anti- Submarine Helicopters</i>	88	28

Source: Courtesy from Nagoa Satoru, OPRF

Table 1 shows the Japan and China military assets in 2013. China within a few years could rival Japan which is more advanced. In addition, Japan still leery of the transparency of China in many aspects, especially the security aspect. This is because large modernization-scale in military assets shows that China would like to enhance its strength to face any possible war. Aggressive attitude shown by China to protect its maritime boundaries sometimes effected the harmonization in Asia.

**Second, China Strings of Pearl Strategy has increased the political influence of China among countries in Asia.** For example, Cambodia and Myanmar are two countries in Southeast Asia that authorize China to put its assets in the country. Indirectly provide positive impact to the three countries to work together in the future. Mearsheimer (2005) argues the increased of this influence is not good because it shows China is trying to become hegemony in the Asia. If this situation continues, Japan will work with USA and India for strengthening the alliance.

**Third, competition in the economy occurred. If in the past, Japan becomes the Centre of economic development in Asia but since China's economic growth has increased causing the contraction in Japan economy.** This situation clearly when more investors had



choosing China as their investment destination. China has the capacity of workforce. According to the OECD report (2013), Japan's economy has contracted by -1.0 per cent in 2008, -5.5% in 2009 before increased 4.4 percent in 2010. However it returned to shrink -0.7 per cent in 2011. This situation is in contrast to China, which experienced an expansion in the economy as much as 9.6 percent in 2008, 9.2 per cent in 2009, 10.4 per cent in the year 200 and 9.3 percent in 2011 (OECD 2013). Despite decreases in the expansion of the Chinese economy in 2011 but it is still experiencing an increase in the economy on average.

**Fourth, the strengthening of the strategic alliance between Japan-USA-India.** The Pivot Policy by USA in Asia Pacific and India's look East policy is welcomed by Japan due to the presence of two powers is able to offset the rise of China at this time. Japan is aware that the country can't afford to block China because it limited mobility. The USA and India presence were helping Japan who does not want to see China dominate the main energy route especially in Straits of Malacca. According to Forbes (2013) the cooperation between Japan, USA and India is to enhance the level of security in the Straits of Malacca. Although perhaps in terms of contrast, it is seen as a military alliance but it is up to the three countries for assessing what other forms of cooperation that they would like to do.

The rise of China's economy and modernization of military assets gave an impact to Japan from two angles. **First, the development that achieved by China nowadays gave a new view that after the end of the cold war in the 1990s, the communist ideology tried to challenge the democracy ideology.** If at the time of the cold war, Russia is the country which led the proxy of communism but it has been replaced by China today. Generally, some countries around Southeast Asia had practiced the same ideology like China such as Vietnam and Myanmar. Therefore, it is feared that this ideology are diffuse and absorb to other countries. This situation caused a worried among the countries which practices democracy as only few years, China successful to modernize its military. Noam Chomsky (2007) quoted that:

*“China does not pose a military threat. In fact, of all the major powers, China has probably been the most restrained in building up its military forces. China poses a very serious threat because it cannot be intimidated [by the US].”*

Source: *Bangkok Post* (2007)

This case shows the Chinese prefer to be silent and choose to not be outstanding. But it still makes other countries questioning what will China did in the future. May be for China this is just a common process but indirectly it caused a competing od military capabilities among countries. **Second, China as a country that has a lot of population as well as raw materials hasa potential to be a unipolar power.** Although at present, the level of technological an in China is not sophisticated compared to USA, Britain or New Zealand but because of China's citizens were hardworking and diligent, it is not impossible for the next few years, the country was able to achieve the high level of development. This had been proved when the centre of Asia economy has turned to China from Japan in 2010. China actually has never sought to be a unipolar power. As quoted by Deng Xiaoping:

*“Keep a cool head and maintain a low profile. Never take the lead - but aim to do something big”.*

Source: Prell (2011)

The spirit shown by the China's leaders and people through the implemented of policiessuch as open door policy and Strings of Pearls strategy were the proof that China want to draw its own country but still keeping some basic rules. This situation causes many investors had to contend with China because they need cheap labour in order to reduce production costs and large market. China for sometimes looks like to mock the countries that suspicious them. Once again, China used the tactics that used by Sun Tzu namely:

*“If your enemy is secure at all points, be prepared for him. If he is in superior strength, evade him. If your opponent is temperamental, seek to irritate him. Pretend to be weak, that he may grow arrogant. If he is taking his ease, give him no rest. If of high morale, depress them If his forces are united, separate them. Attack their weaknesses. Emerge to their surprise”*

Source: <http://www.military-quotes.com/Sun-Tzu.htm>

The tactics succeeded in puzzled the countries such as Japan, USA and India. China may only deny this matter but the rise of China really makes certain countries caution. Some countries also do not want to see China's hegemony as the rise of China became the frightening issues in the world. If this situation were really happened, it will open a new chapter in the international system where the Asia country became the most important country in the world. The words of 'to civilize the Asia People' will be deleted and will not use anymore. This situation would not only embarrass them but will not be forgotten in the history too.

### 5.0 Conclusion

The String of Pearls strategy should not be seen as a bad strategy. Every country has their own strategy to defense their own national interests. In case of China, the strategy had been made to make sure the economy flows (especially for oil and gas) in the Straits of Malacca will be smooth as the country depending on the straits about 80 per cent. China also do not have any attention to be a unipolar power as it has to face the domestic problems such as huge population and lack of raw materials for industrial. Although the country modernized it's military, its only for the economy purpose to make sure the sea lanes of communications (SLOCs) are safe for navigation. Nowadays China focusing on it's economy development rapidly. This is because the rise of economy will make sure the quality of life of their peoples will increase too.

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