

Persuasion Pathways: How USINDOPACOM can Operationalize Information to Win the
Competition in the South China Sea

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14. ABSTRACT The coercive policies implemented by the People's Republic of China (PRC) to achieve its territorial ambition in the South China Sea are well documented. An information-centric strategy can impose reputational costs on China by bringing international attention to its predatory ambitions and activities in order to compel the PRC to moderate its behaviors. The U.S. Indo-Pacific Command can support this broader information campaign to curtail People's Liberation Army and Navy adventurism in the South China Sea by changing the paradigm for how the combatant command staff plans and synchronizes communication across its area of responsibility, demonstrating a persistent presence of a capable military force in the region, and strengthening partner networks.					
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Abstract

The coercive policies implemented by the People's Republic of China (PRC) to achieve its territorial ambition in the South China Sea are well documented. An information-centric strategy can impose reputational costs on China by bringing international attention to its predatory ambitions and activities in order to compel the PRC to moderate its behaviors. The U.S. Indo-Pacific Command can support this broader information campaign to curtail People's Liberation Army and Navy adventurism in the South China Sea by changing the paradigm for how the combatant command staff plans and synchronizes communication across its area of responsibility, demonstrating a persistent presence of a capable military force in the region, and strengthening partner networks.

Introduction

The coercive policies implemented by the People’s Republic of China (PRC) to achieve its territorial ambition in the South China Sea (SCS) are well documented.¹ The struggle for the United States and its allies is how to counter this aggression without escalating the risk of an armed conflict. Meanwhile, China’s behaviors indicate that it is already engaged in a form of warfare under the current conditions with its Military-Civil Fusion policy intensifying aggressive cybertheft, espionage, territorial expansion, and purchase of influence to achieve its objectives.² According to former National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, “China’s leaders believe they have a narrow window of opportunity to strengthen their rule and revise the international order in their favor.”³ As argued in a recent paper, an information-centric strategy applying all instruments of national power, in concert with allies and partners, can impose reputational costs on China by bringing international attention to its predatory ambitions and activities in order to compel the PRC to moderate its behaviors globally to include the SCS.⁴ The U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) can support this broader information campaign and curtail People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and Navy (PLAN) adventurism in the SCS by changing the paradigm for how the combatant command staff plans and synchronizes communication across its area of responsibility, demonstrating a persistent presence of a capable military force in the region, and strengthening partner networks.

¹ Zhang, Ketian, "Cautious Bully: Reputation, Resolve, and Beijing's Use of Coercion in the South China Sea," *International Security* Vol. 44, No. 1 (2019), pp. 117-159, available at https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/full/10.1162/isec_a_00354, accessed April 29, 2020.

² McMaster, HR, “How China Sees the World,” *The Atlantic*, May 2020, available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/05/mcmaster-china-strategy/609088/>, accessed May 9, 2020.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Note: this paper builds on an unpublished paper written by Kurt Stahl, “Harnessing the Power of Information: A Better Approach to Countering Chinese Coercion,” last updated March 20, 2020.

Changing the Paradigm: Organization and Function

The geographic combatant command needs to change the paradigm of the structure and function for how the staff plans and synchronizes communication across its area of responsibility. Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joseph Dunford stressed the importance of this issue: “we can no longer consider capabilities such as information operations, space, and cyber as an afterthought ... They must be mainstreamed in all we do and built into our thinking from the ground up.”⁵ Information must be given the same level of focus as other joint functions such as movement and maneuver, and it must be fully integrated with those functions in pursuit of the objectives.⁶ Historically, public affairs officers have functioned as the principal agents of mass communication while serving as part of the special staff, and their efforts have focused primarily on informing and educating U.S. and international publics about friendly force activities and operations. However, communication from public affairs must not be limited to information about friendly forces. Countering PRC propaganda and publicizing bad behavior by the PLA/PLAN, and reinforcing desirable behavior when appropriate, should be a central part INDOPACOM’s support of the broader national information campaign to counter PRC coercion. As described in the *Joint Concept for Operations in the Information Environment* (JCIOE), all military actions produce information that influences perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors; these actions “should aim to alter behavior of relevant actors to support the achievement of enduring strategic outcomes.”⁷ It is essential to embrace this shift toward information as an organizing

⁵ Dunford, Joseph. “The Pace of Change.” *Joint Force Quarterly. Issue 84, 1st Quarter*. National Defense University Washington United States, 2017: p. 5.

⁶ Thomson, Scott K., and Christopher E. Paul. “Paradigm Change: Operational Art and the Information Joint Function.” Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Washington United States, 2018.

⁷ U.S. Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. *Joint Concept for Operations in the Information Environment*. July 25, 2018, p. 9.

principle when the desired end state is a change in behavior, which is the case in the realm of competition where the aim is influencing others and modifying behaviors.

USINDOPACOM can start making this shift by changing how objectives are framed at the operational level. When appropriate, defining objectives and desired end states in terms of actions and behaviors of relevant actors will help operationalize information by bridging tactical actions with desired strategic outcomes.⁸ Planning and working groups can synchronize the joint functions to create a desired picture in the information domain and assess its impact on relevant actors. Ultimately, it is a mindset shift that is required from one that uses information as a supporting function to one that is the supported function. While it may be a difficult transition for those who have spent their careers focused on hard power, it is required to achieve the strategic objectives of influencing PRC policy and behavior in the SCS.

In order to effectively employ information as a joint function, a shift in organization will also be required. Not only must the informational facets of military activities be understood, “the integration of physical and informational power” must be institutionalized and operationalized, according to the JCIOE.⁹ However, the JCOIE does not describe how this integration should be accomplished. One method to integrate physical and information power could be through a weekly working group led by USINDOPACOM with participation from the U.S. Department of State to coordinate communication, facilitate deliberate and dynamic messaging opportunities, and share plans with subordinate units and country teams. This planning and coordination effort will support timely, synchronized, and effective communication across every echelon and function in support of the overall information campaign. One

⁸ Thomson and Paul, “Paradigm Change: Operational Art and the Information Joint Function.”

⁹ Joint Chiefs of Staff. *Joint Concept for Operations in the Information Environment*, July 25, 2018. Accessed on April 22, 2020. Available at: https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/concepts/joint_concepts_jcoie.pdf?ver=2018-08-01-142119-830.

challenge that must be overcome is the compartmentalization of each information related capability (IRC) to include physical actions.¹⁰ Each IRC must be viewed and synchronized as part of a unified informational approach, which can be accomplished through a routine working group if given priority and attention from the commander and staff. A bolder solution could include establishing a standing joint, interagency theater information bureau as a form of operations center for directing the information campaign. This bureau would require representation from interagency partners and all USINDOPACOM IRCs as well as operational intelligence and law.

Regardless of the method employed for institutionalizing and operationalizing the integration of physical and informational power, those responsible for communication strategy and synchronization of IRCs must be tied into the other joint functions. For example, public affairs (and communication strategy) must be deeply integrated with J-2 Intelligence, J-3 Operations, and J-5 Plans. This integration is essential for effective deliberate targeting, feedback, and assessment and for leveraging speed in order to take advantage of dynamic messaging opportunities. The commander and the J-3 must recognize opportunities to exploit events for informational gain and understand how physical actions will affect the desired message.¹¹ The J-2, leveraging the intelligence community, will provide feedback on effects for assessment and highlight opportunities through observation and anticipation similar actions taken in support of the lethal targeting process.¹² Public affairs will be engrained in this process and postured to provide timely information supporting the operational objectives. Communication professionals cannot be reactive or think only about informing the U.S. public of operations and

¹⁰ Janoe, Henry. "The Changing Face of Warfare: Developing a Holistic Information Warfare Strategy." *Army Law*, 2019, pp. 42-47.

¹¹ Thomson and Paul, "Paradigm Change: Operational Art and the Information Joint Function."

¹² Department of the Army. *ATP 3-13.1, The Conduct of Information Operations*, October 2018.

activities. Rather, they must proactively drive the information campaign, leveraging an integrated staff to get the right information out rapidly via the most effective means. Lastly, subordinate commands and country teams must be involved in waging the information campaign; it cannot merely reside at the combatant command level. These entities can be consulted during planning and provide valuable feedback to USINDOPACOM through regular synchronization efforts conducted by the working group or theater information bureau.

Forward Presence: A Prerequisite for Asserting Influence

Forward presence is a prerequisite for increasing contextual understanding of the environment and asserting influence to protect national interests and shape regional security.¹³ Presence is also more than just forward-positioned combat forces; it is aimed at affecting the behaviors of foreign governments, both friendly and adversary, without applying lethal military force.¹⁴ A robust U.S. military presence is a commitment to regional stability and to support partners and allies demonstrated in blood, treasure, and effort. In short, forces under USINDOPACOM operating in and around the SCS provide credibility to U.S. policy and strategic messaging, which is essential for an effective information campaign.

Forward presence is often considered a key to maintaining physical access to a region, but it is just as important for maintaining access in the information and cognitive domains. The information domain involves data, information, and knowledge transferred through human perception to the cognitive domain where beliefs, intuition, judgments, and decisions are formed.¹⁵ Maintaining influence in the cognitive domain of both adversaries and friends is

¹³ Shunk, Dave, Charles Hornick, and Dan Burkhart. "The Role of Forward Presence in US Military Strategy." *Military Review* 97, no. 4 (2017): 64.

¹⁴ McFate, Montgomery. "Being there: US Navy organisational culture and the forward presence debate." *Defense & Security Analysis* (2020): 1-23.

¹⁵ Brazzoli, Mario Silvino. "Future prospects of information warfare and particularly psychological operations." *South African army vision* (2020): 220-221

critical to safeguarding national interests. This multinational team can assert influence in the SCS by convincing the PRC that the costs outweigh the benefits of asserting control within the nine-dash line. This approach reflects deterrence by denial – convincing an adversary to decide against taking a hostile course of action due to an unfavorable cost-benefit analysis.¹⁶ Therefore, influencing behavior is ultimately achieved in the cognitive domain by affecting the calculus of a relevant decisionmaker. The U.S. military’s physical forward presence in the region will ensure that its influence remains active in the minds of PRC and PLA/PLAN leadership, which is where the desired effects of an information campaign take place.

Considering that cognitive bias can impede rational decision making, the information campaign should also identify and exploit biases. For instance, Xi Jinping appears to value how he is perceived domestically and abroad. Thus, the information campaign can influence perceptions of the PRC to drive his decision-making in a desired direction utilizing negative and positive information. Resisting PRC expansion and resource exploitation in the SCS must involve directly associating the negative consequences to the international community with Xi’s policies and decisions. This approach will inflict reputational costs on the PRC that could prod the regime in another direction. A similar dynamic is currently unfolding in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, in which China is experiencing significant reputational damage that could factor into future decision making.¹⁷ Simultaneously, USINDOPACOM could reward more desirable behaviors by the PRC and PLA. For instance, when the PLAN conducts themselves at sea in a professional manner in compliance with international norms, USINDOPACOM can

¹⁶ A. Wess Mitchell, “The Case for Deterrence by Denial,” American Interest online, 12 August 2015, accessed 22 April 2020, <http://www.the-american-interest.com/2015/08/12/the-case-for-deterrence-by-denial/>.

¹⁷ Hirschberg, Peter. “Exclusive: Internal Chinese Report Warns Beijing Faces Tiananmen-like Global Backlash Over Virus.” *Reuters*, May 4, 2020. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-china-sentiment-ex/exclusive-internal-chinese-report-warns-beijing-faces-tiananmen-like-global-backlash-over-virus-idUSKBN22G19C>. Accessed May 10, 2020.

reinforce those behaviors with praise. Additionally, USINDOPACOM can seek opportunities to cooperate with China in areas of broader international concern such as humanitarian assistance / disaster relief (HA/DR), counter-piracy and counter-terrorism efforts, and environmental safety. When the PRC cooperates, USINDOPACOM should publicly praise these successes to reinforce the behavior. In order to accomplish any of these information-centric objectives, forward presence is required.

USINDOPACOM can also support the information campaign through demonstrating support for the sovereignty of other countries by utilizing its active presence in the SCS to reinforce international rules and norms, which are at odds with the PRC's aggressive territorial claims. This presence need not be an entire fleet, but it must be enough to make China understand that the United States is serious about defending its interests in the region and give friendly countries confidence to resist PRC pressure to accommodate. As suggested by one regional expert, USINDOPACOM should consider conducting the Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC) in the South China Sea and invite China to participate to reduce the concerns of provocation.¹⁸ Holding the world's largest multinational naval exercise in the contentious SCS would send a strong message that the international community is united. While some countries would be reluctant to participate due to fear of retaliation from China, inviting PLAN participation could alleviate concerns and put pressure on the PRC to accept the internationally recognized boundaries in the SCS.¹⁹ The focus of this exercise should be nonthreatening, such as Safety of Life at Sea, to demonstrate that the United States is not interested in provoking

¹⁸ Pham, Tuan. "One of China's Worst Nightmares: RIMPAC 2020 in South China Sea?" *The National Interest*. September 2018. Accessed on April 21, 2020. Available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/chinas-worst-nightmare-rimpac-2020-south-china-sea-32327>

¹⁹ Pham, Tuan. "One of China's Worst Nightmares: RIMPAC 2020 in South China Sea?" *The National Interest*. September 2018. Accessed on April 21, 2020. Available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/chinas-worst-nightmare-rimpac-2020-south-china-sea-32327>.

conflict. Such an exercise could also promote American values abroad, through exposure to U.S. servicemembers, which is significant in a competition of ideas. Moreover, facilitating a major multinational exercise in the SCS will help the U.S. military remain a symbol of strength in the region.

Enduring presence demonstrates a commitment to regional stability, and the U.S. military provides a vehicle to put the words of U.S. policy into action. According to one group of military strategists, “The forward presence of U.S. [military] forces communicates U.S. priorities to the world, strength to our enemies, and commitment to our allies, partners, and friends.”²⁰ Combined exercises, HA/DR preparation and response, military-to-military training, exchange and education programs, and other security cooperation activities can build relationships and engender trust if they are consistent.²¹ Each interaction between U.S. forces and allies and partners is not just an opportunity to enhance interoperability and combat capabilities, it is a chance to strengthen bonds and become more united in purpose.²² Moreover, USINDOPACOM should use these engagements to further align national interests and bolster information sharing in order to make the information campaign more effective. USINDOPACOM should also develop the ability to share real-time information with countries such as Vietnam, the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia to essentially create a common operating picture with a functioning communication network dedicated to exchanging information regarding issues of mutual concern. Measures like these could help harmonize strategic communication efforts

²⁰ Shunk, Dave, et. al. "The Role of Forward Presence in US Military Strategy." *Military Review* 97, no. 4 (2017): 64.

²¹ Watts, Stephen, et. al. "Pacific Engagement: Forging Tighter Connections Between Tactical Security Cooperation Activities and US Strategic Goals in the Asia-Pacific Region." No. RR-1920. *RAND Arroyo Center*, 2018.

²² Shunk, Dave, et. al. "The Role of Forward Presence in US Military Strategy." *Military Review* 97, no. 4 (2017): 56-65.

and ultimately increase international pressure on the PRC to change exploitive behaviors like fishery depletion.²³

Strengthening Partner Networks: “Win before Fighting”

The U.S. military can support a broader information campaign countering Chinese coercion through strengthening partner networks, which is critical in building a multinational counterforce capable of influencing the PRC. While USINDOPACOM is already working toward “strengthening our allies and partners” as one of four focus areas highlighted by the combatant commander, this aim must involve operationalizing information.²⁴ Indeed, Admiral Davidson acknowledged one of two principal desired outcomes of the theater strategy is “to win before fighting.”²⁵ Information is integral to this approach as it hinges on successfully influencing the behaviors of potential adversaries. Presenting a united front with capable military forces will send a message to the PRC and PLA leadership that continuing adventurism and coercive activities in the SCS is not worth the cost of military conflict. Strengthening relationships with regional allies and partners will help USINDOPACOM achieve this objective.

Strategic messaging toward U.S. partners and allies must also be coherent and coordinated, in words and actions, to achieve a united front across the multinational security network that can effectively influence PRC and PLA decisionmakers. This clarity of message and unity of voice is critical to bring greater attention to the PRC’s goals and actions and the threat they pose to the greater international community. USINDOPACOM, in coordination with

²³ MacKinnon, Jaymes. "Fishery Depletion and the South China Sea." *Flux: International Relations Review* 9, no. 1 (2019).

²⁴ Davidson, Philip. “Statement of Admiral Philip Davison, U.S. Navy, Commander, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, Before the Senate Armed Services Committee on U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Posture.” February 12, 2019. Accessed on April 24, 2020. Available at: https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Davidson_02-12-19.pdf.

²⁵ Ibid.

the U.S. Department of State, can help publicize deliberately unsafe activities and incursions on the sovereignty of other countries by Chinese military and paramilitary forces to heighten international awareness of the PRC's behavior.²⁶ Although the task can be challenging, the U.S. military has the intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets available to detect many of these behaviors and the ability to bring such activities into the limelight.²⁷ Increasing ISR assets and coverage in the SCS would help USINDOPACOM detect, document, and provide visual proof of misbehavior by China.²⁸ This public exposure will support the information campaign by imposing additional reputational costs on the PRC and help influence future behaviors.

One challenge USINDOPACOM will face is employing strategic messaging efforts in congruence with key regional partners and allies. Investing in multilateral partnerships to align interests, improve cooperation, and build collective maritime domain awareness (MDA) is one solution. USINDOPACOM can use the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+) as an information conduit to bolster synergy and rapport with allied and partner nations. The ADMM+ provides a forum where the United States can not only communicate with partner nations within ASEAN, it can engage in direct dialogue with China.²⁹ While USINDOPACOM is already a participant, co-chairing the working group on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief in 2019, there may be further opportunities to

²⁶ Stahl, Kurt. "Harnessing the Power of Information: A Better Approach to Countering Chinese Coercion." Unpublished paper. Last updated March 20, 2020.

²⁷ Ackerman, Robert. "Chinese Threat Dominates INDOPACOM Intelligence," *SIGNAL MAGAZINE*, November 2019. Accessed on April 24, 2020. Available at: <https://www.afcea.org/content/chinese-threat-dominates-indopacom-intelligence>.

²⁸ Blue, Linden. "Monitoring Capabilities, ISR Tech will Deter America's Adversaries," *C4ISRNET*, October 1, 2019. Accessed May 13, 2020. Available at: <https://www.c4isrnet.com/opinion/commentary/2019/10/01/monitoring-capabilities-isr-tech-will-deter-americas-adversaries/>.

²⁹ Saman, Mazura Md, Salma Yusof, Jamal Rodzi Dahari, and Azlan Iskandar Abdul. "An Appraisal of ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) as Part of Defence Diplomacy Initiative for Conflict Resolution." *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, no. 6, 2019.

leverage this organization to advance strategic messaging and build networks that will strengthen the information campaign.³⁰ For example, USINDOPACOM could start working with friendly countries within ASEAN to build an integrated multilateral MDA framework that can be employed to raise collective situational awareness across the SCS.³¹ Combined with a robust ISR presence, establishing MDA across the partner network around the SCS will enable the timely detection and sharing of information related to PRC aggression and exploitation.

In addition to strengthening emerging networks, USINDOPACOM must help reinforce established alliances in the theater to project a stronger, united front. In coordination with U.S. Forces Japan, U.S. Forces Korea, and the Department of State, USINDOPACOM should deliberately work to buttress relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK). While improving relations between countries is typically viewed within the realm of diplomacy, there are steps the military can take to bring the two countries closer together. These alliances are essential to networked security in the region and in providing credibility to the U.S.-led effort to stop PRC aggression.³² A report published by the Heritage Foundation highlights that “Japanese–South Korea disputes only serve China and North Korea’s long-standing “divide and conquer” objectives to drive wedges amongst the U.S. and its critical Asian allies.”³³ The U.S. information campaign must include a counter to this PRC objective, which USINDOPACOM can support by bringing the ROK and Japan closer together militarily in small steps.

³⁰ Davidson, “Statement of Admiral Philip Davison, U.S. Navy, Commander, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, Before the Senate Armed Services Committee on U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Posture.”

³¹ Cheng, Dean. “The Importance of Maritime Domain Awareness for the Indo-Pacific Quad Countries.” *The Heritage Foundation*. March 6, 2019. Accessed May 13, 2020. Available at: <https://www.heritage.org/global-politics/report/the-importance-maritime-domain-awareness-the-indo-pacific-quad-countries>.

³² Klingner, Bruce, and Riley Walters. *The US Must Limit Damage from the Japan-South Korea Trade Dispute*. Heritage Foundation, 2019, pp. 1-11

³³ *Ibid*, p. 7.

Japan's push to bolster its military capabilities in response to the growing PRC threat provides an opportunity to bolster networked security in the region.³⁴ USINDOPACOM should capitalize on this opportunity by encouraging and facilitating additional exercises to increase interoperability, cooperation, and understanding. Although the ROK and Japan have recently experienced contentious relations over trade and other issues that are concerning, the ultimate renewal of their bilateral intelligence-sharing agreement, the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSMIA), demonstrates both countries are committed to regional security despite other disagreements.³⁵ One step USINDOPACOM should take is advocating an annual multilateral exercise involving the United States, Japan, the ROK, and at least one other country in the region such as Australia. While a trilateral exercise may be unpalatable politically for the ROK and Japan, adding another country for an uncontroversial exercise, such as one with a search and rescue focus, could provide the political cover needed to bring Japan and South Korea closer together.³⁶ The objective should be to strengthen relations and interoperability between Japan and the ROK in order to influence the PRC by sending the message that the U.S. alliances in the region are united.

USINDOPACOM should support budding security partnerships such as those Japan is developing with both Vietnam and the Philippines, as these countries must be aligned with the United States in order to significantly influence PRC actions in the SCS. Japan's willingness to develop bilateral security partnerships and the receptiveness toward Japan's efforts demonstrates

³⁴ Dian, Matteo. "Japan, South Korea and the rise of a networked security architecture in East Asia." *International Politics*, 2019, pp. 1-23.

³⁵ Motoko Rich and Edward Wong. "Under U.S. Pressure, South Korea Stays in Intelligence Pact with Japan." *New York Times*. November 22, 2019. Accessed on April 24, 2020. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/22/world/asia/japan-south-korea-intelligence.html>

³⁶ Roehrig, Terence. Interview by Kurt Stahl, Newport, RI, May 7, 2020.

a shared concern for “China’s emerging maritime power and ambition.”³⁷ Meanwhile, Vietnam and the Philippines are drawing closer in response to the PRC’s continued encroachment on fishing and natural resource in the SCS.³⁸ The PRC’s behaviors in these waters have inflicted disproportionate damage to the environment to include pollution and harming the coral reefs on which the fish and ecosystem are dependent.³⁹ These dynamics present an emerging opportunity to increase international attention on the PRC’s aggressive overreach in the SCS, specifically focusing on its attempts to assert control of territory and exploit resources outside of its internationally-recognized economic exclusive zone.⁴⁰ USINDOPACOM can support cooperation efforts with Vietnam and the Philippines to advance the information campaign by increasing collective MDA and unifying multinational strategic messaging against PRC aggression in the SCS.

Finally, USINDOPACOM should remain steadfast in its conduct of bilateral and multilateral exercises, military-to-military engagements, and personnel exchanges to continue fostering relationships that promote positive conditions for unifying lasting partnerships. The United States should also continue to invest in hosting foreign officers for professional military education programs such as those at the Naval War College and other war and staff colleges, which build cross-cultural understanding and lasting relationships between career officers from countries around the world that can ultimately help advance U.S. strategic partnerships and

³⁷ Bjørn Elias Mikalsen Grønning. “Japan’s security cooperation with the Philippines and Vietnam,” *The Pacific Review*, 31:4, 2018, pp. 533-552.

³⁸ Pitlo, Lucio B., “Why Philippines Solidarity with Vietnam in the South China Sea Fishing Row Matters,” *The Diplomat*, April 16, 2020. Accessed May 14, 2020. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/why-philippine-solidarity-with-vietnam-in-south-china-sea-fishing-row-matters/>.

³⁹ Houdre, Chloe. “Environmental Ramifications of the South China Sea Conflict: Vying for Regional Dominance at the Environment’s Expense.” July 12, 2018. Accessed May 14, 2020. Available at: <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/environmental-law-review/blog/environmental-ramifications-of-the-south-china-sea-conflict-vying-for-regional-dominance-at-the-environments-expense/>.

⁴⁰ Long, Drake. “China Announces Summer Fishing Ban in the South China Sea,” *Radio Free Asia*, May 1, 2020. Accessed May 14, 2020. Available at: <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/scs-fishing-05012020194131.html>.

interests.⁴¹ This approach will aid the development of a robust regional security network capable of signaling to the PRC that continued aggression in the SCS is not worth the costs.

The PRC is Vulnerable to an Information Campaign

Some may argue that the PRC's central control over information, economic, and military power will make it difficult to affect leadership decision-making and that military solutions will escalate the problem making future cooperation more difficult. However, the military solutions in support of a broader information campaign are non-lethal approaches in this competition. The alternative would only embolden PLA adventurism in the SCS and damage the credibility of the U.S.-led security network. Even though China is controlled by a totalitarian regime, its leadership may still make rational decisions based on cost-benefit analysis. Furthermore, the PRC's centralized control makes its entire system vulnerable if disrupted at the top. Conversely, the U.S. approach can provide an overarching information campaign to provide intent from which mission command can be employed in execution. USINDOPACOM can support a national strategy aimed at winning the competition in the SCS and beyond through an information-centric approach featuring strong partner networks, a persistent presence of a capable military force in the region, and a combatant command staff postured to effectively plan and synchronize communication across its area of responsibility.

⁴¹ Atkinson, Carol. "The role of US elite military schools in promoting intercultural understanding and democratic governance." *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace* 4, no. 2, 2015, pp. 19-29.

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