

**Effect of the Decline of Aquatic Protein Resources in the South China Sea on Regional
Stability**



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14. ABSTRACT The efforts of the United States and the international community, both past and present, to challenge China's territorial claims in the South China Sea have not produced, and never will produce, any meaningful effect on China's behavior. This is because the current narrative - which centers on contesting the legal basis of China's territorial claims, a confrontation-based information warfare campaign, and active operations - fundamentally misunderstands China's motivations and focuses on a minor root cause for regional instability. This paper argues that the real threat to regional stability in the South China Sea is the decline of the aquatic protein resources in the area and that the United States should take the lead in re-focusing the international narrative on cooperation to preserve these resources - even to the extent of ceasing to contest China's territorial claims in the area. This paper further argues that the Port State Measures Agreement provides a framework for resource preservation through encouraging and leveraging China's willing participation in the agreement.					
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Introduction

The confrontational-and-legalistic narrative in use by the international community to counter China's territorial claims in the South China Sea (SCS) is a toothless tiger. And, to make matters worse, that tiger is chasing the wrong prey. The current international narrative centers around preserving the SCS for free and open trade flow and containing China's perceived rise in prominence on the regional and global stage. The current narrative attempts to achieve these goals by contesting the legal basis of China's territorial claims and is rooted in customary international law and the United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea. Its lines of effort rely on legal challenges in court, a confrontation-based information warfare campaign, and active operations to challenge the claims such as freedom of navigation operations (FONOPS). This narrative has remained consistent since China began land reclamation in December of 2013 and has failed to produce any real results.¹ A prime example is the United Nations Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling in 2016, which China refused to participate in and refuses to acknowledge.² This is not entirely surprising as the current narrative fundamentally misunderstands why China is making these claims and focuses on a minor root cause for regional instability in the region instead of the prime one – the fast declining aquatic protein resources (APR) of the SCS.

¹ “China’s Island Building in the South China Sea: Damage to the Marine Environment, Implications, and International Law,” U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, accessed October 4, 2020, <https://www.uscc.gov/research/chinas-island-building-south-china-sea-damage-marine-environment-implications-and>; Michael Pompeo, “U.S. Position on Maritime Claims in the South China Sea,” accessed Aug 31, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-position-on-maritime-claims-in-the-south-china-sea/>; Austin Wright, Bryan Bender, and Philip Ewing, “Obama team, military at odds over South China Sea,” *Politico*, July 31, 2015, <https://www.politico.com/story/2015/07/barack-obama-administration-navy-pentagon-odds-south-china-sea-120865.html>; “Obama: China ‘using muscle’ to dominate in South China Sea,” *British Broadcasting Corporation*, April 10, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-32234448>.

² “Obama: China ‘using muscle’ to dominate in South China Sea.”; Drake Long, “Philippine Leader Tells UN 2016 Arbitration Award on South China Sea ‘Beyond Compromise,’” *Radio Free Asia*, September 22, 2020, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/philippines-southchinasea-09222020174225.html>.

The United States (US) should use the diplomatic, information, and economic measures of its national power to refocus the international conversation in the SCS around preserving the region's APR. Three significant reasons support the need to make this narrative shift. First, the current narrative will never produce any useful change in Chinese behavior and is damaging to the US' international credibility. Next, the threat to regional stability in the SCS posed by the current and projected depletion of the APR is greater than China's territorial claims. Finally, a narrative based around resource conservation has a high likelihood of guaranteeing China's willing and genuine participation, which is required to affect actual conservation of the SCS's APR.³

Why the International Narrative Has No Teeth

The current narrative used to counter China's territorial claims in the SCS is toothless because it has not produced a discernible change in China's behavior. Short of an application of significant military force, it will never produce one. Neither the Obama nor Trump administration's firm positions on the issue, the United Nations Permanent Court of Arbitration 2016 decision, nor the various diplomatic methods attempted by littoral nations in the SCS have produced a discernible change in China's behavior.⁴ These efforts all failed because the collective narrative fundamentally misunderstands why the Chinese government continues to defend their territorial claims in the SCS and because the Chinese government benefits from the international narrative directed against it.

³ For this essay, the US' narrative will be used as a representation of the international narrative and the terms will be used interchangeably.

⁴ Long, "Philippine Leader."

China's territorial claims in the SCS are not, as the current US' official position suggests, based entirely on a desire to interrupt global trade through the SCS by turning the area into a Chinese maritime empire or controlling the natural resources of the area.⁵ A cursory look at a shipping traffic website, such as www.marinetraffic.com, combined with the continued success of the US Navy's freedom of navigation operations in the SCS, quickly dispels the former claim. There is clearly no restriction of commercial shipping or the use of international waters despite the militarization of the Chinese claimed islands in the area.⁶ The SCS energy resource argument is more challenging to contest but still does not sufficiently explain China's actions nor provide a realistic path to an effective alternative narrative.

Instead, the two distinct factors that explain China's territorial claims in the SCS and provide the path to an effective narrative are China's institutional memory of the "Century of Humiliation"⁷ and how the Chinese people perceive and respond to their government's territorial claims. First, since the cultural revolution, the memory of China's treatment at the hands of colonial empires and foreign invaders has shaped its relationship with the outside world and inculcated into the Chinese political memory a deep sense of wariness about the intention of nations like the US.⁸ Second, the Chinese people's support for their government historically strengthens when they perceive the government to be standing up to foreign powers. Through this lens, it is easy to see how the territorial claims in the SCS benefit the Chinese government. By successfully claiming ancient rights to the islands, by successfully carrying out the difficult

⁵ Pompeo, "U.S. Position on Maritime Claims in the South China Sea."

⁶ Kevin Varley et al, "Fight Over Fish Fans a New Stage of Conflict in South China Sea," *Bloomberg*, September 1, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2020-dangerous-conditions-in-depleted-south-china-sea/>. It is also not in China's interest to start any level of conflict in the South China Sea that would disrupt the free flow of trade. In 2016 China imported \$598 billion worth of goods throughs the South China Sea and exported \$874 billion.

⁷ Yi Wang, "'The Backward Will Be Beaten': Historical Lesson, Security, and Nationalism in China," *Journal of Contemporary China*, March 2020: 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2020.1744387>.

⁸ Yi Wang, "'The Backward Will Be Beaten': Historical Lesson, Security, and Nationalism in China," 3.

engineering feat of recovering and garrisoning the islands, and by successfully defending them from foreign aggression, the Chinese government can demonstrate to its people that it is a strong government worthy of the support of the Chinese people – which is something the government is very interested in right now.⁹ From this, it is easy to see that an international narrative that understands that the Chinese government is primarily motivated by its people's perception, and not the international community, could bring actual change in China's behavior.

Perhaps the worst part of the current international narrative is that it is counterproductive to itself. The wording of the US government's current position is a convenient vehicle to demonstrate how the Chinese government benefits from the current narrative. Pompeo's statement is unambiguously written to portray China as a bully attempting to use their diplomatic, military, and economic power to shoulder out the less powerful littoral nations of the SCS. It is also clearly written to show the US as a brave and beneficent ally of those same nations which is only attempting "to preserve peace and stability, uphold freedom of the seas in a manner consistent with international law, maintain the unimpeded flow of commerce, and oppose any attempt to use coercion or force to settle disputes."¹⁰ From this It is easy to see that this confrontation-based narrative may be precisely what the Chinese government wants. If the Chinese people's support of their government grows due to a confrontation-based narrative, especially as the US' actions have grown more hostile in the COVID-19 environment,¹¹ the

⁹ Jessica Chen Weiss, "Ours Will No Longer Be a Nation Subject to Insult and Humiliation," *New York Times (Online)*, September 28, 2019, ProQuest; Alice Su, "Chinese clamor for freer speech; Beijing tries to control the narrative in the coronavirus outbreak, but people are angry," *Los Angeles Times*, February 9, 2020, ProQuest. Issues such as climate change, Hong Kong protesters, and COVID-19 are challenging the Chinese government's ability to govern and manage their population.

¹⁰ Pompeo, "U.S. Position on Maritime Claims in the South China Sea."

¹¹ Emily Feng, "South China Sea Once Again Becomes A Dangerous Military Flashpoint," *National Public Radio*, July 14, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/14/890738379/south-china-sea-once-again-becomes-a-dangerous-military-flashpoint>.

current narrative is not only toothless but counterproductive to any goal of influencing China's behavior.

Finally, there is potential that, in addition to strengthening the Chinese government's resolve around its territorial claims, the current narrative could do long term damage to the US' international credibility. Results matter – especially when the international opinion of the US' credibility is perceived to be wavering.¹² If the US continues to insist on an ineffective narrative, allies will likely start to look elsewhere for assistance. This, in turn, could result in a lessening of the effectiveness of the US' diplomatic and economic instruments of national power.

Of course, if the US were to cease contesting China's claims to the area, China could decide to restrict, or even interdict, all shipping traffic that does not directly benefit their interests – but they could also do that right now. Neither diplomatic protestations, FONOPS, nor international court rulings have deterred China from pressing their territorial claims and enhancing the reclaimed islands.¹³ Therefore it is unreasonable to think the same measures would stop them from crossing a red-line like locking down the SCS or interdicting shipping if they decided doing so was in the national best interest. Effectively, nothing the US is doing is keeping the SCS open. It's open because it's not yet in China's perceived interest to shut it down. This also still leaves the US with the credible threat of, or actual use of, military intervention as a tool,

¹² Ishaan Tharoor, "Trump, Merkel and the U.S.'s waning global clout," *The Washington Post*, July 28, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/07/28/trump-merkel-us-waning-global-clout/>; Christopher J. Bolan, "American Credibility is Dangerously Low: Just Not For the Reasons You May Think," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, July 31, 2019, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/07/american-credibility-is-dangerously-low-just-not-for-the-reasons-you-may-think/>; Hal Brands et al., *Credibility Matters: Strengthening American Deterrence in an Age of Geopolitical Turmoil*, (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2018), https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/Credibility_Paper_FINAL_format.pdf.

¹³ "China's Island Building in the South China Sea;" Pompeo, "U.S. Position on Maritime Claims in the South China Sea;" Wright, "Obama team, military at odds over South China Sea;" "Obama: China 'using muscle' to dominate in South China Sea."

and the US should make very clear that it would resort to military intervention if China were to cross either of those lines.¹⁴

A further concern, and a natural extension of the above, is that by ceasing to oppose China's territorial claims in the SCS, the US would encourage China to make more excessive claims in the future. This is a strong argument. However, it can still be mitigated by the credible threat of armed force combined with the narrative shift discussed later in this paper.

Therefore, the US should take the lead in shifting the international narrative by changing its own, and it should do so quickly. The new narrative should abandon its confrontational and legalistic nature while making clear crossing red-lines would result in the use of armed force. It should also refocus the discussion around the conservation of the APR in the SCS. Far from damaging its international credibility, this could enhance its credibility by demonstrating that the US is willing to negotiate and work with other nations instead of relying on confrontational tactics that have been, and will remain, completely ineffective. And most importantly, it would bring to the forefront of international attention the real threat to regional stability in the SCS.

It's the fish, stupid

The single greatest threat to regional stability in the SCS is the imminent collapse of APR of the area.¹⁵ It is on this threat that the international community should focus a new narrative. Because of the region's maritime and littoral nature, the effects of the decline are, and will be,

¹⁴ Brands, *Credibility Matters: Strengthening American Deterrence in an Age of Geopolitical Turmoil*. There is potential for a whole separate, but related, JMO paper based on this paper. Relevant to this paper, however, they do go into significant depth about the importance of carefully deciding on red-lines and actually following through when those lines are crossed. That follow through would be crucial to the arguments presented here, but there isn't sufficient space to directly tie their argument to mine.

¹⁵ Christopher Bodeen, "Looming collapse of fisheries in the South China Sea?" *Navy Times*, May 20, 2019, <https://www.navytimes.com/news/your-navy/2019/05/20/looming-collapse-of-fisheries-in-the-south-china-sea/>.

felt across all levels of the societies that border the SCS.¹⁶ Additionally, these social, economic, and regional stability effects are obscured and made more challenging to solve by the international community's focus on ongoing territorial disputes.¹⁷

Aquatic protein resources in the SCS have been precipitously declining for at least the last 70 years. The potential consequences of this are demonstrated in just how much of these resources come out of the area. The SCS is one of the richest producers of APR globally and is the largest producer in Asia. In 2014 the SCS alone supplied 12% of the world's aquatic protein resource consumption. The full extent of the decline in APR of the SCS since the middle of the 20th century is unknown, but experts estimate that present levels are, at best, 30% of what they were in the 1950s. At worst, they may only be at 5%.¹⁸

This decline's social impacts are felt by the 3.7 million residents of the region who actively fish the SCS and the even bigger number of people whose livelihood connects to the sea in the area.¹⁹ A decline in APR clearly raises the potential for loss of income. An unsurprising driving factor for how satisfying people in Asia perceive their life is the standard of living. While the standard of living is not solely tied to income, it cannot be ignored.²⁰ This raises the specter of social unrest arising from the decline of APR, which could adversely affect the support of the various peoples for the governments of the SCS.

¹⁶ These effects then propagate to the global level because of the SCS's geographic make up and its location on a major commercial sea route.

¹⁷ Varley, "Fight Over Fish Fans a New Stage of Conflict in South China Sea." It is important, here, to acknowledge that the rights to the aquatic protein resources are directly connected to the territorial claims so the territorial claims cannot be totally ignored. The central theme of this essay, though, is that they should be subordinated to the decline of the aquatic protein resources.

¹⁸ Varley, "Fight Over Fish Fans a New Stage of Conflict in South China Sea." Between 1950 and 2014 the SCS produced almost twice the amount of catch (504.6 million tons) than its nearest competitor (the East China Sea with 288.3 million tons).

¹⁹ Varley, "Fight Over Fish Fans a New Stage of Conflict in South China Sea;" Huihui Shen and Shuolin Huang, *Aquaculture and Fisheries*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aaf.2020.03.002>.

²⁰ Yee Ting Ngoo, Nai Peng Tey, and Eu Chye Tan, "Determinants of Life Satisfaction in Asia," *Social Indicators Research* 124, no. 1 (October 2015): 154.

Less obvious are the non-monetary effects of declining resources. For example, the impact of a fisherman losing his or her job is not strictly limited to the monetary implications. The need to secure the things at the base of Maslow's pyramid cannot be forgotten, and there are other ways to earn money. Illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing is a prime example of this consequence and is discussed in more detail below. IUU can also lead to a rise in human trafficking and crime as people seek to meet their basic needs²¹ resulting in a further social impact on society. Another example is that the littoral nations of the SCS consume more APR per capita than the world average.²² Loss of this dietary staple would have significant impact on quality of life. These effects are not as easily discernible and will require a significant amount of national capital to mitigate. Altogether, the adverse social impacts of the APR decline can quickly combine to cause significant regional issues.

At the national level, the decline in APR in the SCS will significantly affect the economies of the region. All of the SCS nations make significant use of fishing imports and exports to bolster their gross domestic product. Some states, like China, have other significant contributors to their GDP, but others do not.²³ Either way, the complete collapse of the APR in the SCS will have a substantial economic impact on the region.

²¹ Emma Myers and Sally Yoze, *Civil-Military Cooperation to Combat Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing: A Summary of the September 2017 National Maritime Interagency Advisory Group Meeting*, (Washington, D.C.: The Stimson Center, 2018) <https://www.stimson.org/wp-content/files/file-attachments/NMIO%20NIAG%20Final%20Report%20with%20Appendices.pdf>; World Economic Forum, *Ending Illegal Fishing: Data Policy and the Port State Measures Agreement* (Geneva, 2019), http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Ending_Illegal_Fishing_Report_2019.pdf.

²² FAO Fisheries Division, "Fishery and Aquaculture Country Profiles," accessed August 31, 2020. <http://www.fao.org/fishery/countryprofiles/search/en>. Data is available for Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam. Data was taken from specific country pages.

²³ FAO Fisheries Division, "Fishery and Aquaculture Country Profiles." GDP and the "agriculture, forestry, and fishing, value added" to GDP were compared for China, Vietnam, Philippines, and Indonesia. Hongzhou Zhang and Fengshi Wu, "China's Maritime Fishery and Global Ocean Governance," *Global Policy* 8, no. 2 (May 2017): 223. However, Hongzhou Zhang and Fengshi Wu argue persuasively in a 2017 article that coercive measures against China won't work because of the massive portion of the global market enjoyed by China's fishing industry.

A less apparent economic impact of the decline of the APR in Asia is the rise of IUU fishing. First mentioned above, IUU fishing is primarily a result of the ocean's vastness and the age-old human desire to avoid paying taxes. It is also reasonably an offshoot of the loss of legitimate fishing jobs. IUU can range from merely fishing without a license to harvesting protected species to under-reporting a catch to maximize profit.²⁴ The World Economic Forum estimates that IUU fishing siphons up to \$23.5 billion from the global market annually, has a significant impact on fishery conservation efforts, and has links to human and contraband trafficking.²⁵

Taken together, the social, economic, and stability impacts of the aquatic protein resource decline in the SCS present a significant threat to regional stability. Perhaps most frustrating is that the ineffective international narrative discussed above is making all three of these worse. The ongoing territorial disputes have directly led to a rise in clashes in the region between law enforcement and fishermen of the concerned nations. These clashes, which usually stay below the level of armed conflict, are born out of governments' attempts to gain control of the situation and protect their citizens, as well as frustrated fishermen trying to earn a living. The clashes also make it virtually impossible for third parties, or scientists, to accurately monitor the state of the APR in the area.²⁶ A further decline in the region's resources will only exacerbate the region's social, economic, and stability challenges.

All hope is not lost, though, and there already exists an international agreement that could function as a cornerstone of a new narrative based around preserving the APR of the SCS. The

²⁴ Jessica Aldred, "Explainer: Illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing," *China Dialogue Ocean*, November 21, 2019, <https://chinadialogueocean.net/11813-explainer-illegal-unreported-and-unregulated-fishing/fishing.html>.

²⁵ World Economic Forum, *Ending Illegal Fishing: Data Policy and the Port State Measures Agreement*.

²⁶ Varley, "Fight Over Fish Fans a New Stage of Conflict in the South China Sea;" Asyura Salleh, "The South China Sea: Preventing the Tyranny of the Commons," *The Diplomat*, January 4, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/01/the-south-china-sea-preventing-the-tyranny-of-the-commons/>.

Port States Measures Agreement (PSMA) took effect in June of 2016 due to 20 years of work by the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations and concerned nations. The PSMA was designed primarily to combat IUU fishing by using international information sharing and cooperative enforcement to make it impossible for IUU fishermen to land their catch. The PSMA of today has 66 parties to the agreement and is the hard law culmination of a series of soft law agreements and non-binding measures.²⁷ Because the PSMA is an agreement based around APR conservation and international cooperation, instead of international competition, aggression, or territorial claims, the PSMA provides the perfect framework to achieve long-term stability in the SCS. From this, as part of its new narrative, the US should encourage China, through a combination of diplomatic cooperation with other nations and economic incentives, to ratify and genuinely enforce the PSMA.

China is the key, not the enemy

China's willing and genuine participation in the Port State Measures Agreement is necessary to preserve the APR of the SCS and may be sufficient to ensure regional stability. As discussed above, the success of the PSMA will rely on international cooperation and information sharing. Only five of the ten littoral nations in the SCS are signatories to the PSMA, and China is not one although the government has indicated a willingness to join the agreement.²⁸ China's

²⁷ World Economic Forum, *Ending Illegal Fishing: Data Policy and the Port State Measures Agreement*; "Agreement on Port State Measures (PSMA): Parties to the PSMA," Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, accessed October 4, 2020, <http://www.fao.org/port-state-measures/background/parties-psma/en/>; Todd Woody, "China is key to closing ports to illegally caught fish," *China Dialogue Ocean*, October 25, 2019, <https://chinadialogueocean.net/11135-china-psma-illegal-fishing/>; "Agreement on Port State Measures (PSMA): History," Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, accessed October 4, 2020, <http://www.fao.org/port-state-measures/background/history/en/>.

²⁸ Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, "Agreement on Port State Measures (PSMA): Parties to the PSMA." The other non-signatories are Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, and Taiwan. Woody, "China is key to closing ports to illegally caught fish;" "China Targets Distant-Water Criminals With New Fisheries Law,"

participation, then, is required because its official fishing fleet and the amount of IUU fishing vessels flying Chinese flags are the largest in the region.²⁹ From this, China's willing participation would go a long way towards ensuring regional stability. However, China's current fishing enforcement infrastructure is not sufficient to effectively implement the PSMA.³⁰

It seems counterintuitive, but the Chinese efforts to establish and defend their claims in the SCS actually provide a pathway to preserving resources, ensuring regional stability in the area, and effectively enforcing the PSMA. The Chinese island reclamation projects in the Spratly islands offer an ideal location for China to establish a port for the fishermen of the SCS to drop off their catch and for China to enforce the provisions of the PSMA to prevent IUU fishing. The location of the Spratly's for this effort is ideal for two reasons. First, because of the depletion of the APR in the littoral waters of the SCS, the bulk of the fish population has shifted into the Southern Regions of the SCS.³¹ And, second, because of the relatively central location of the island features in the SCS. The multitude of competing territorial claims in the region strengthens the second point – a lot of nations are located close to these islands, and their fishermen can and want to fish the area.

By establishing a port at a reclaimed island where fishermen of all nations could land and sell their catch, China could, at a stroke, become an efficient guarantor of the PSMA, help to recover the APR of the area, strengthen the international legitimacy of their claim to the area, and solidify its regional hegemony. So, the benefits of establishing a PSMA port in the Spratly Islands are multitude – for China and the entire region. A central location makes enforcement of

IUUWATCH, accessed August 20, 2020, <http://www.iuuwatch.eu/2020/01/china-targets-distant-water-criminals-with-new-fisheries-law/>.

²⁹ Woody, "China is key to closing ports to illegally caught fish."

³⁰ IUUWATCH, "China Targets Distant-Water Criminals With New Fisheries Law."

³¹ Ralph Jennings, "Marine Life Declines for Another Year in Contested, Overfished South China Sea," *VOA News*, May 8, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/science-health/marine-life-declines-another-year-contested-overfished-south-china-sea>.

the PSMA achievable and efficient with China's existing infrastructure. Fishermen of all nations can maintain their income by selling to the processors at the chosen Spratly island, lessening social concerns in the littoral nations.³² At the economic level, littoral governments can tax the income of the fishermen. For China, they can tax the entire process or lease processing rights. Finally, this would shift the narrative around the islands from a territorial dispute to a collective effort to make money and preserve the APR of the area, significantly reducing regional tension.

China's recent reforms of its Coast Guard (CCG), conducted to give them the ability to defend their claims in the SCS, can benefit the enforcement of the PSMA and cooperation in the region as well. The recent reforms combined with an increased CCG presence mean that little investment would be needed to begin the enforcement of the PSMA.³³ This also allows China to present itself to the Chinese people as a regional leader and force for good, which may appeal to the Chinese government making it more likely they would genuinely participate.³⁴ The CCG could work with other littoral nation's coast guards to enforce the PSMA and support a combined economic interest. Cooperation between coast guards would also provide potentially wary littoral nations a method to monitor China's conduct.

This entire idea requires the international community and the littoral nations of the SCS to stop contesting China's nine-dash line claims, agree to work together, and trust that China would not abuse this type of arrangement. This is a giant leap and a giant ask, but it is not

³² This is a completely speculative idea and significantly more planning would be required to make it fully feasible. For example, it would have some effect on the current processors that can't be ignored. However, as long as there are aquatic protein resources available, this can be worked out – especially if a framework can be established.

³³ Mike Chia-Yu Huang, "The 2018 Reform of the China Coast Guard: Logic, Development and Implications," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 31, no. 3 (September 2019): 419-421; Varley, "Fight Over Fish Fans a New Stage of Conflict in South China Sea."

³⁴ Weiss, "'Ours Will No Longer Be a Nation Subject to Insult and Humiliation;'" Zhang and Wu, "China's Maritime Fishery and Global Ocean Governance," 224.

impossible. Preservation of the APR in the region is crucial, and this is a potential path to ensure that preservation. It would be difficult and certainly not perfect, but it is worth exploring.³⁵

China's willing and genuine participation in the PSMA is absolutely required to preserve the APR of the SCS, so the US should encourage and even incentivize China to do so. This will cost the US very little and has a high likelihood of success. Transnational advocacy based on non-confrontational methods and areas not directly threatening to Chinese sovereignty has a history of successfully influencing the Chinese government.³⁶ China's active and genuine participation in the PSMA must be a core part of the new narrative in the SCS that the international community, led by the US, must adopt immediately. In shaping a new narrative in the SCS, the US needs to demonstrate to the regional and its global partners that China is the key to successfully preserving the APR of the SCS and not the enemy.

Conclusion

The current international narrative in use to counter China's maritime claims in the SCS is toothless. It has not affected any change in China's behavior, and it will never do so because it fundamentally misunderstands why China is making and defending those claims. The narrative is also based around the wrong threat to regional stability in the SCS. China's territorial claims are, short of the unlikely event where the US decides armed conflict is necessary, a *fait accompli*. To think, or hope, that China will respond to the current narrative is to waste time and resources that must be used to combat the real threat to regional stability: the decline of the APR in the

³⁵ In fact, it presents the US with a unique opportunity to act as a coalition builder since the countries of the region would likely require significant incentives or concessions to trust China. This, in turn, could provide significant benefit to the US. See Brands, *Credibility Matters: Strengthening American Deterrence in an Age of Geopolitical Turmoil* for more information.

³⁶ Zhang and Wu, "China's Maritime Fishery and Global Ocean Governance," 224.

SCS. The PSMA provides the best framework for preserving these resources and ensuring regional stability through China's willing participation in the agreement. The US risks more, both to the regional stability of the SCS, and its international credibility and standing, by standing by the old, ineffective narrative. It is time for the US to drop its confrontation-based stance around China's claims in the SCS and to demonstrate to the world, through active cooperation and encouragement, that the most pressing threat to regional stability can be solved through actively soliciting and encouraging China's participation. This is the best way for all parties to benefit and to prevent the collapse of the APR in the area.

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