

Shifting Focus: SCS to IOR



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INTRODUCTION

We are all familiar with the old Charlie Brown cartoons where Lucy pulls the football away every time Charlie tries to kick it. Charlie comes back time and time again with the same results, and the viewers are left wondering – why does Charlie keep going back? Shouldn't Charlie rethink his approach? Can't he find someone else to play with? Is there a different field he can play on? One can make similar observations to INDOPACOM's approach to the South China Sea (SCS) and the great power competition with China. Both Charlie's and INDOPACOM's situations require reevaluation. INDOPACOM needs to shift its primary focus from the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). INDOPACOM's policies in the SCS are not working. The United States' hyper-focus on the region blinds it to opportunities in the IOR that, if not acted upon quickly, will result in American irrelevancy in both the IOR and the SCS.

BACKGROUND

The importance of the INDOPACOM to the United States' national interests is unquestioned. The United States views its past, present, and future as “interwoven with the Indo-Pacific.”¹ Multiple strategic documents, including the 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS), the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS), and National Military Strategy (NMS), all highlight INDOPACOM's importance. The approximate 370,000 troops, 2,000 aircraft, and 200 naval

¹ U.S. Department of Defense. *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region* (Washington, DC: June 1, 2019), 2.

vessels deployed to the region provide tangible evidence of its significance.² Former Secretary of Defense James Mattis explicitly identified it as America's "priority theater."³ This importance is tied directly to China's rise and the advent of a renewed great power competition, playing out in the SCS. However, a significant disparity exists between the United States' stated goals and the current environment in the SCS. It is becoming increasingly evident that INDOPACOM's current policies and activities are not achieving those ends and, in many ways, are being counterproductive.

INDOPACOM'S CURRENT ACTIONS IN THE SCS ARE NOT WORKING

INDOPACOM's current actions in the SCS are not working. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo outlined the United States' policy goals in the SCS as seeking a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) that "(1) respect for sovereignty and independence of all nations; (2) peaceful resolution of disputes; (3) free, fair, and reciprocal trade based on open investment, transparent agreements, and connectivity; and (4) adherence to international law, including freedom of navigation and overflight."⁴ A realist view of the current environment in SCS demonstrates a lack of progress in achieving those goals, especially in the SCS region. Despite the United States increasing freedom of navigation operations (FONOPS), advocating for diplomatic solutions, and backing legal actions to combat Chinese encroachment in the SCS, the Chinese are gaining a

²U.S. Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region* (Washington, June 1, 2019), 6. <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPORT-2019.PDF>

³ *Remarks by Secretary Mattis at Plenary Session of the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue*. Washington, United States Washington, Washington: Federal Information & News Dispatch, LLC, 2018. <https://login.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fdocview%2F2049094796%3Faccountid%3D322>.

⁴U.S. Department of State, *Advancing a Shared Vision. A Free and Open INDO-PACIFIC Advancing a Shared Vision* (Washington, DC, 2019), 6. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Free-and-Open-Indo-Pacific-4Nov2019.pdf>

marked advantage in the region.⁵ The Chinese have expanded their territory, shifted diplomatic and economic ties, stymied or ignored legal actions, and promulgated a new narrative of China's historical claims in the region.

While the United States has impugned Chinese encroachment, China has steadily continued building bases along its 9 Dash line. During the past seven years, the Chinese have increased their territory by 3200 acres in the Spratly Islands alone.⁶ Despite making promises to the contrary, China has weaponized many of its reclamation projects such as Woody Island.⁷ INDOPACOM military efforts and diplomatic and economic advocacy have not stalled Chinese actions. With each questionable shoal that is enhanced, the risk to U.S. military forces has increased. The U.S. is also facing challenges on the diplomatic front.

While the United States has promoted open markets and diplomatic alliances, it has instead pulled out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). It is increasingly viewed untrustworthy or unreliable ally in the region.⁸ According to a survey by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, "47 percent of respondents to the ISEAS survey have little or no confidence in the United States as a strategic partner and provider of regional security."⁹ By

⁵ Patrick M. Cronin and Ryan Neuhard. "Total Competition." *Center for a New American Security Reports* (Jan 8, 2020) 6. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2335640251>.

⁶ "Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea." *Council on Foreign Relations*. Accessed Oct 16, 2020. <https://cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/territorial-disputes-south-china-sea>.

⁷ O'Rourke, Ronald. "U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background & Issues for Congress". (R42784, updated 13 October 2020) U.S. Congressional Research Service <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R42784>page 21

⁸ Edward White,, John Reed, Kathrin Hille and Primrose Riordan. "The Trump Factor: Asian Allies Question America's Reliability." *Financial Times*. 14 June 2020. Accessed Oct 16, 2020. <https://www.ft.com/content/74576c3a-6303-4ba0-bbe3-15b563ce6019>.

⁹ Siew Tang, Hoang Thi Ha, Anuthida Saelaow Qian, Glenn Ong, and Pham Thi Phuong Thao. *The State of Southeast Asia: 2020 Survey Report*. Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishah Institute, 2020. https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/TheStateofSEASurveyReport_2020.pdf

comparison, China has expanded its diplomatic overtures incentives and sought to “proactively project an image abroad of China as a trustworthy, benevolent, and benign partner.”¹⁰ With the United States becoming unsteady and unpredictable, China has filled the vacuum.

While the United States has put its faith in the international legal system and has promoted itself as a regional leader, China has outpaced the U.S. in the information domain and through innovative use of lawfare. China is vigorously promoting a 1000-year-old claim to the SCS despite current court rulings to the contrary.¹¹ To bolster its claim, "China is apparently taking a more active role in conveying its narrative and engaging international think-tanks and public institutions."¹² Additionally, China's innovative use of lawfare, combining “legal and pseudo-legal arguments to legitimize its actions, raise doubts about unfavorable rulings, and provide a pretext for states to side with China or remain neutral” is reshaping the region.¹³ INDOPACOM’s current efforts to counter these actions have been ineffective at best.

The U.S. is no longer the dominant military power in the region. While the U.S. focused on counterinsurgency wars in the Middle East, China developed sophisticated weapons systems and has deployed them in supporting roles across the SCS region. Despite the U.S.'s pivot to the

¹⁰ Chris Ogden, “Beyond Territory: China’s ‘Zhoubian’ (Peripheral) Diplomacy in the South China Sea.” *The Foreign Policy Center*. 15 September 2020, Accessed 16 October 2020. <https://fpc.org.uk/beyond-territory-chinas-zhoubian-peripheral-diplomacy-in-the-south-china-sea/>.

¹¹ "China Claims 1,000 Years Sovereignty Over South China Sea; Refutes US Allegations." *The Economic Times*, July 14, 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/china-claims-1000-years-sovereignty-over-south-china-sea-refutes-us-allegations/articleshow/76963122.cms?from=mdr>.

¹² Lucio Blanco Pitlo III, "Prospects for the South China Sea in 2020." *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*. 14 February 2020. Accessed Oct 17, 2020, <https://amti.csis.org/prospects-for-the-south-china-sea-in-2020/>.

¹³ Patrick M. Cronin and Ryan Neuhard. "Total Competition." *Center for a New American Security Reports* (Jan 8, 2020). <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2335640251>.

Pacific and aggressive FONOPs, it is increasingly becoming outmatched militarily.¹⁴ The development of the People's Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF) has made the entire SCS targetable by Chinese missiles.¹⁵ The Chinese are fast outpacing the U.S. in shipbuilding. A recent Congressional Research Report quoted James Kraska of the U.S. Naval War College saying, "The US has lost advantage throughout the spectrum of operations, from low-level interaction against China's maritime militia to higher-end conflict scenarios."¹⁶ Despite policy documents citing continued U.S. dominance in the region, the image on the ground is one of U.S. decline and China's ascendance.

The Republic of the Philippines is emblematic of INDOPACOM's failure in the SCS. A former U.S. ally and a long-term linchpin in the U.S. defense system, the Philippines' current status reflects the earlier assertions regarding INDOPACOM's failure in the SCS. The Chinese encroachment in the Scarborough Shoal has complicated Philippine territorial claims.¹⁷ Its president has turned away from Washington towards Beijing.¹⁸ The Philippines has won a

¹⁴ Gregory B Poling, "The Conventional Wisdom on China's Island Bases is Dangerously Wrong." *War on the Rocks*. 10 January 2020. Accessed 17 October 2020. <https://warontherocks.com/2020/01/the-conventional-wisdom-on-chinas-island-bases-is-dangerously-wrong/>.

¹⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020* (Washington, August, 2020), ii. <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>

¹⁶ Ronald O'Rourke, "U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background & Issues for Congress". (R42784, updated 13 October 2020) U.S. Congressional Research Service https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R42784_page87

¹⁷ Mark E. Rosen, "Philippine Claims in the South China Sea: A Legal Analysis." CNA Occasion Paper. August 2014. <https://seasresearch.files.wordpress.com/2014/08/iop-2014-u-008393.pdf>.

¹⁸ Derek Grossman, "China Refuses to Quit on the Philippines." *The Rand Blog*. 22 July 2020. Accessed 17 October 2020. <https://www.rand.org/blog/2020/07/china-refuses-to-quit-on-the-philippines.html>.

judgment against China in the international court system but to little effect.¹⁹ The Philippines' current condition is an indictment of the failure of INDOPACOM's policies in the region.

Looking at the United States' success or lack thereof, it is evident that INDOPACOM's actions and policies in the South China Sea have not achieved their stated aims. Militarily, diplomatically, and economically, China has gained a marked advantage in the region on all fronts. Some may argue that the U.S. increased freedom of navigation operations (FONOPS), and its base repositioning has provided a counterweight to the Chinese. Still, to use a chess analogy, at this point, China has a better positional advantage and stronger pieces on the board. The United States needs to take a realistic view of the whole INDOPACOM region and adapt its approach to remain relevant in the overall great power competition.

INDOPACOM'S HYPER-FOCUS ON THE SCS BLINDS TO OPPORTUNITIES IN THE IOR

INDOPACOM's hyper-focus on the SCS blinds it to opportunities in the IOR. For years, INDOPACOM has neglected the IOR and missed opportunities to gain leverage over China in the great power competition. Distracted by the decades-long wars in the Middle East and focusing their limited budgets on the SCS, INDOPACOM's underinvestment in the IOR runs counter to current trends and other countries' initiatives in the region. Moreover, INDOPACOM's neglect stymied further integration with India, abdicated leadership of the

¹⁹ Tom Phillips, Oliver Holmes and Owen Bowcott, "Beijing Rejects Tribunal's Ruling in South China Sea Case." *The Guardian*, 12 July 2016. Accessed 18 October 2020.
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/12/philippines-wins-south-china-sea-case-against-china>

Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD), and failed to leverage China's Malaccan Dilemma to their advantage.

Long ignored or overlooked, the IOR has increased in importance and relevance over the past ten years. Its large and seemingly unsurmountable distances have shrunk by advances in technology and increases in globalization. A recent Brookings Institution article cited a "four-fold increase in commercial shipping and noted that 40 percent of the world's oil supply and 64 percent of the oil trade" transiting the region.²⁰ The region has evolved into new ground for the great power competition with China and India, both increasing their commitments.²¹ In comparison, the U.S. hasn't paid the IOR the attention it deserves.

For decades, the U.S. has under-resourced the IOR financially, diplomatically, and militarily. The most current, visible, and transparent measure of INDOPACOM's lack of emphasis in the IOR is the number of resources the command's Regain the Advantage Initiative devotes to the region. According to the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) 2020 Section 1253 Assessment, only three million out of one billion dollars is devoted to Southeast Asia for dispersal, staging, and prepositioning facilities.²² INDOPACOM reserved the bulk of the Regain the Advantage funds to bases and facilities in the eastern Pacific orientated towards

²⁰ Dhruva Jaishankar, "Indian Ocean Region: A Pivot for India's Growth." *Brookings*. Brookings Institution, 12 September 2016. Accessed 18 October 2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/indian-ocean-region-a-pivot-for-indias-growth/>.

²¹ Daniel Darling, "The Indian Ocean: Emerging Great Power Competition." *RealClearDefense*. 3 November 2016. Accessed 18 October 2020. https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2016/11/04/the_indian_ocean_emerging_great_power_competition_110308.html

²² U.S. Department of Defense. *National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) 2020 Section 1253 Assessment: Executive Summary* (Washington, DC. 2020) <https://int.nyt.com/data/documenthelper/6864-national-defense-strategy-summ/8851517f5e10106bc3b1/optimized/full.pdf>

Northeast Asia and the SCS. If you follow the money, INDOPACOM's priorities don't lie in the IOR. In terms of diplomacy, only after several decades of a wait-and-see approach with India has the U.S. and India solidified their relationship.²³ A review of INDOPACOM's major exercises shows minimal engagement in the IOR region as opposed to increased FONOPS in the SCS.²⁴ Compared with combined exercises conducted by Japan, Australia, and India, the U.S.'s lack of engagement is concerning. Compared with China's increased commitment to the region, it is potentially calamitous.²⁵

INDOPACOM failed to capitalize on India's Look East Act East policy. India's Look East Act East policy represents a realignment of India's foreign policy, which seeks to build on ties between India and Southeast Asia.²⁶ Working in partnership with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), India promotes many of the same goals in INDOPACOM's Free and Open Indo-Pacific policies. Analysts for the Congressional Research Service noted, "India's long-held focus on maintaining "non-alignment" in the international system—more recently conceived by Indian officials as "strategic autonomy"—is, in the current century, shifting toward increased bilateral engagements."²⁷ The current status of the U.S. Indian

²³ Sameer Lalwani and Heather Byrne, "Great Expectations: Asking Too Much of the US-India Strategic Partnership." *The Washington Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (Oct 11, 2019): 41-64. https://www.stimson.org/wp-content/files/file-attachments/LalwaniByrne_42-3.pdf.

²⁴ Huma Amin, "United States Presence in Indian Ocean: Counter Strategy for China." *Modern Diplomacy*, 14 Jan 2020. Accessed 18 October 2020. <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2020/01/14/united-states-presence-in-indian-ocean-counter-strategy-for-china/>.

²⁵ Suri Gopal, *China's Expanding Military Maritime Footprint in the Indian Ocean Region: India's Response*. (New Delhi, 2017, Pentagon Press.) <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2014467364>

²⁶ Balasubramanian Chandrasekhar, "From Look East to Act East: Flowering of an Asian Renaissance." *The Geopolitics*. 4 November 2019. Accessed 18 October 2020. <https://thegeopolitics.com/from-look-east-to-act-east-flowering-of-an-asian-renaissance/>.

²⁷ Kronstadt, Alan K and Shayerah Ilias Akhtar. "India-U.S. Relations: Issues for Congress." (R44876, updated 19 June 2017) U.S. Congressional Research Service

relationship reflects the decades of neglect and non-agreement. While sharing similar security concerns, the two nations have only recently become more amicable partners.²⁸ The U.S., however, pulled out of the TPP and has continued to primarily conduct military exercises in the SCS. Agreements such as the February 2020 Joint Statement with India outlining future cooperation may have come too late.²⁹ The failure to accelerate the bilateral relationship with India and leverage India's willingness to build partnerships cost INDOPACOM valuable time to lay the groundwork to counter Chinese incursions into the IOR. To maximize India's strategic shift with its Look East Act East policy will require INDOPACOM shifting its priority of effort from the SCS to the IOR.

The U.S. failed to prioritize and take a leadership role in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, also known as the QUAD. The QUAD is a strategic dialogue between Japan, India, Australia, and the U.S. Formed in 2007 in response to the December 2004 tsunami; it stagnated until recently being reborn as a mechanism to counter China's rise.³⁰ The U.S., an early proponent of the QUAD, failed to resource and lead the group, choosing instead to prioritize Middle East conflicts and actions in the SCS. A robust QUAD has the potential to be a significant counterbalance to China both economically and militarily. The Heritage Foundation released statistics showing the combined economies of QUAD members dwarfing the Chinese

<https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R44876/6> page 9

²⁸ Alan K. Kronstadt and Shayerah Ilias Akhtar. "India-U.S. Relations: Issues for Congress." (R44876, updated 19 June 2017) U.S. Congressional Research Service <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R44876/6>

²⁹ White House. *Joint Statement: Vision and Principles for the United States-India Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership* 25 February 2020. Accessed Oct 18, 2020. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/joint-statement-vision-principles-united-states-india-comprehensive-global-strategic-partnership/>

³⁰ Jeff Smith, "The Quad 2.0: A Foundation for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific." *The Heritage Foundation*. 6 July 2020. Accessed 17 Oct 2020. <https://www.heritage.org/global-politics/report/the-quad-20-foundation-free-and-open-indo-pacific>.

economy and further noted that the four countries' combined navies would materially outmatch China.³¹ Failure to foster this four-country counterweight to China was a missed opportunity to acquire a different lever in the great power competition; prioritizing the IOR will rectify this.

Additionally, while continually increasing operations in the SCS, INDOPACOM missed the opportunity to fully wargame and exercise plans for the Malaccan Strait, a significant choke point in the region. Eighty percent of Chinese goods travel through the Malaccan Straits, providing a significant point of leverage.³² Recognizing this predicament in 2003, Chinese President Hu Jintao coined the phrase Malaccan Dilemma to describe the situation.³³ Due to its SCS focus, INDOPACOM is out of position to adequately apply pressure on the Malaccan Strait.³⁴ INDOPACOM's current geostrategic position combined with America's lack of leadership in promoting the QUAD, has denied INDOPACOM achievable means to deter the Chinese.

In sum, while the United States was engaged in the Middle East and hyper-focused on the South China Sea, it missed opportunities in the IOR, including building infrastructure, strengthening partnerships, and developing alternative means of leverage. This lack of investment provided maneuver room for the Chinese to make significant inroads. Between the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), String of Pearls initiative, and increased paramilitary patrols, the

³¹ Derek Grossman, "The Quad Needs Broadening to Balance China—and Now's the Time to Do It." *The Rand Blog*. 22 October 2018. Accessed 17 October 2020. <https://www.rand.org/blog/2018/10/the-quad-needs-broadening-to-balance-china-and-nows.html>.

³² Abdullah Khan, "The Malacca Dilemma: A Hindrance to Chinese Ambitions in the 21st Century." *Berkeley Political Review*, 26 August 2019. Accessed 18 October 2020. <https://bpr.berkeley.edu/2019/08/26/the-malacca-dilemma-a-hindrance-to-chinese-ambitions-in-the-21st-century/>

³³ Ian Storey, "China's 'Malacca Dilemma.'" *The Jamestown Foundation*. 12 April 2006. Accessed 17 October 2020. <https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-malacca-dilemma/>

³⁴ Nathan P. Freier, and John H. Schaus. "INDOPACOM through 2030." *The US Army War College: Parameters* 50, no. 2 (Summer 2020): 27-34. <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol50/iss2/5/>.

net effect has been to cede the advantage to the Chinese in the IOR and the great power competition.

THE U.S. MUST ACT QUICKLY TO ADAPT ITS STRATEGIC APPROACH

The U.S. must act quickly to adapt its strategic approach in the Indo-Pacific theater or run the risk of irrelevancy. INDOPACOM must recognize the character of war, and international power dynamics have changed.³⁵ Weapons systems have become more sophisticated, and competition has increased as weaker powers become true competitors. Southeast Asian nations are at a tipping point in the new environment. Therefore, INDOPACOM must act quickly to stem China's potentially irreversible inroads into the IOR, ASEAN states' possible alignment with China, and, most importantly, prevent miscalculation and full armed conflict in the SCS.

China is making significant inroads into the IOR and solidifying its position in the region. China has made advances in diplomacy, investment, and trade in Burma, Myanmar, Nepal, and Sri Lanka.³⁶ The Chinese strategy, often called the String of Pearls, refers to "the network of Chinese military and commercial facilities developed by China in countries falling on the Indian Ocean between the Chinese mainland and Port Sudan."³⁷ China has increased its military presence in the IOR developing a base in Djibouti, conducting more regular naval operations in

³⁵ Huma Amin, "United States Presence in Indian Ocean: Counter Strategy for China." *Modern Diplomacy*, 14 Jan 2020. Accessed 18 October 2020. <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2020/01/14/united-states-presence-in-indian-ocean-counter-strategy-for-china/>.

³⁶ U.S. Congressional Research Service "China-India Great Power Competition in the Indian Ocean Region: Issues for Congress," (R45194, updated 26 October 2018) 20 April 2020. https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20180420_R45194_3d4bf676130e76924f5fea6d2e54d3a78e2200a9.pdf

³⁷ Maninder Dabas, "Here is all You should Know about 'String of Pearls', China's Policy to Encircle India." *Indiatimes*. Updated 23 June 2017. Accessed Oct 18, 2020. <https://www.indiatimes.com/news/india/here-is-all-you-should-know-about-string-of-pearls-china-s-policy-to-encircle-india-324315.html>.

the Indian Ocean, and employing paramilitary coast guard forces.³⁸ Like the classic game of Go, China is encircling the IOR and squeezing out competitors. If the U.S. doesn't act quickly, the board will be filled, and American strategic options will be limited.

ASEAN countries are in a quandary and unsure where to place their future alliances. Many countries are concerned about the United States' commitment to the region but are also worried about China's coercive practices.³⁹ An article in the *Diplomat* noted, "More than three-quarters believe that U.S. engagement with Southeast Asia has declined under the Trump administration, and 79 percent believe that China is the most influential *economic* power in the region. Only slightly more than a quarter of respondents see the United States as the most influential *political and strategic* power in Southeast Asia."⁴⁰ ASEAN countries are looking for an effective counterweight to Chinese expansion and the U.S. is not providing it. In the absence of a demonstrably committed United States INDOPACOM, Vietnam, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and others may be compelled or coerced into arrangements with China. INDOPACOM should shift its focus to the IOR to reassure Southeast Asian countries and ensure future ASEAN alliances.

INDOPACOM's aggressive efforts in the SCS increase the risk of miscalculation and full-spectrum conflict with China. Much has been written recently about the rising tensions in the SCS. Since January 2020, the United States has conducted almost forty flights near China and

³⁸ Michael J. Green, and Andrew Shearer, "Countering China's Militarization of the Indo-Pacific." *War on the Rocks*. 23 April 2018. Accessed 18 October 2020. <https://warontherocks.com/2018/04/countering-chinas-militarization-of-the-indo-pacific/>.

³⁹ Tang Siew, Hoang Thi Ha, Anuthida Saelaow Qian, Glenn Ong, and Pham Thi Phuong Thao. *The State of Southeast Asia: 2020 Survey Report*. Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2020. https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/TheStateofSEASurveyReport_2020.pdf

⁴⁰ John Goyer, "US must Recapture Lost Ground in Southeast Asia Or Risk being Shut Out." *The Diplomat*. 14 February 2020. Accessed 16 October 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/02/us-must-recapture-lost-ground-in-southeast-asia-or-risk-being-shut-out/>.

four FONOPS.⁴¹ China also has stepped up military drills in the region.⁴² The language between the two countries has become more aggressive. The high number of drills and antagonizing rhetoric increase the chances for a miscalculation that could lead to full military conflict. INDOPACOM should create breathing room in the SCS by shifting its operations to the IOR. The move will inhibit further Chinese expansion, reassure ASEAN allies, and reduce the chances of a costly war.

COUNTERARGUMENT/REBUTTAL

To many, shifting INDOPACOM's priorities to the IOR will seem like an abdication of responsibilities and will embolden future Chinese expansion elsewhere. Such thinkers are falling into heuristic traps, specifically the Sunk Cost trap and the Stockdale Paradox. The Sunk Cost Trap describes the tendency to follow through on an endeavor if one has already invested time, effort, or money into it, whether or not the costs outweigh the benefits.⁴³ Sunk Trap thinkers may argue that we have invested too much effort in infrastructure and advanced weapon systems in the SCS to shift to the IOR, claiming it will negate all the recent improvements and training in the region. On the contrary, the current capabilities won't be wasted; they will be put to better use and employed in the IOR and the SCS. Similarly, the infrastructure improvements will not be for naught but will continue to contain further Chinese expansion and temper Chinese behavior in the SCS.

⁴¹ Oriana Skylar Mastro, "Rising Tensions in the South China Sea." *Council on Foreign Relations*, 20 May 2020. Accessed 17 October 2020. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/rising-tensions-south-china-sea>

⁴² Brad Lendon. "China Increases Military Drills as Tensions with US Heat Up." *CNN*. Updated 11 August 2020. Accessed 16 October 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/11/asia/china-taiwan-guam-military-exercises-intl-hnk-scli/index.html>.

⁴³ "The Sunk Cost Fallacy." Accessed Oct 18, 2020. <https://thedecisionlab.com/biases/the-sunk-cost-fallacy/>.

The more dangerous heuristic trap that those who might oppose INDOPACOM prioritizing the IOR over the SCS is the Stockdale Paradox. The Stockdale Paradox refers to the need to remain optimistic but to confront current realities. A Harvard Business School article quotes Admiral James Stockdale summarizing the concept, “You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.”⁴⁴ Planners, leaders, and politicians must recognize the current realities in the SCS, no matter how brutal they are. Objectively, China has gained a marked advantage in the region. As noted earlier, the entire region is under a Chinese missile umbrella, and China is outpacing the United States in terms of military capabilities. This is a new reality. However, an INDOPACOM shift to the IOR will, in effect, shift China’s strategic calculus. Accepting the current facts in the SCS and prioritizing the IOR, the United States will increase its strategic options, gain leverage over China, and advance in the overall great power competition.

CONCLUSION

In 2012, the United States began its pivot to the Pacific in recognition of the importance of rising nation-states in the region. In 2018, the command changed its name to INDOPACOM, recognizing the connectivity of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Now is the time for the command to recognize the changing environment in the theater and shift its priority of effort from the SCS to the IOR if it is to maintain its competitive edge in the great power competition with China.

⁴⁴ Boris Groysberg and Robin Abrahams, “What the Stockdale Paradox Tells Us about Crisis Leadership.” *Harvard Business School*, 17 August 2020. Accessed 17 October 2020.
<https://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/what-the-stockdale-paradox-tells-us-about-crisis-leadership>

The command needs to confront the brutal reality of the current environment in the SCS and China's growing capabilities. INDOPACOM needs to open its eyes to the opportunities present in the IOR, including India's Look East Act East initiative, ASEAN states outreach, and the QUAD's potential. Lastly, INDOPACOM must act before it is too late.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The critical first step to enacting change is at the strategic level. INDOPACOM strategic planners must examine their thinking and identify roadblocks to change. The United States has a long history in the SCS, but planners must not be wedded to past practice or sunk costs. This assessment will require a reexamination of the Regain the Advantage initiative and cooperation with its interagency partners to make innovations like the QUAD effective tools to oppose Chinese advances.

At the operational level, INDOPACOM should minimize FONOPS in the SCS and reallocate the resources to increase multilateral exercises with India, Australia, and Japan in the IOR. All effort should be expended to create combined maritime task forces with our partner nations. The U.S. should increase the number of port calls to ASEAN countries and seek to build habitual relationships. Operational planners should leverage new thinking in doctrine such as Expeditionary Advanced Basing Operations (EABO) and Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment (LOCE) and train in locations like the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Immediate actions can be taken at the tactical level, including establishing exchange and liaison billets at the task force level.

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