

Expanding United States Support to Maritime Law Enforcement in the South China Sea



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14. ABSTRACT China uses its Coast Guard to exert sovereign control over the South China Sea, support its excessive maritime claims, and undermine the rule of law. The United States should help regional partners expand maritime law enforcement capability to counter China's aggression. The United States should develop cooperative maritime law enforcement agreements to promote the rule of law and provide a framework for increased support to regional maritime law enforcement capability. Under these agreements, the United States should help partners enforce their sovereign rights within the South China Sea through shiprider operations. Similar to operations conducted by the U.S. Coast Guard throughout the world, shiprider operations would provide a flexible mechanism to develop partner capacity, demonstrate support, and promote rules-based order in the region. The United States should focus any initiative to develop regional law enforcement capability on expanding relationships with the Philippines and Vietnam.					
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INTRODUCTION

In July 2020, the U.S. issued a strong declaration supporting the sovereignty of its partners in the South China Sea and condemning China's efforts to exert control over its illegitimate maritime claims.¹ The China Coast Guard ("CCG") is the principal maritime actor by which China exercises that control, intimidates partners, and undermines the rule of law.² In response, other countries are expanding their own coast guard forces, but lack the size and capability to effectively counter the CCG.³ The U.S. should assist regional partners in countering China's aggression by strengthening maritime law enforcement capacity. First, the U.S. should develop maritime law enforcement agreements with regional partners to provide a framework for enhanced cooperation. The U.S. should then conduct combined law enforcement operations to aid partners in patrolling their waters to promote maritime governance in the region. Finally, the U.S. should focus its initial efforts with the maritime law enforcement agencies in the Philippines and Vietnam. Together, these activities will promote the rule of law, develop partner nation capacity, and counter the CCG's aggression and control.

BACKGROUND

China is engaged in a power competition to solidify control over the South China Sea through intimidation and aggression.⁴ The CCG serves as China's dominant maritime actor for advancing these strategic aims.⁵ A coast guard force enables nations to exercise the rights of sovereignty at sea by controlling use, preventing access by others, and regulating conduct

¹ U.S. Department of State, *US Position on Maritime Claims in the South China Sea* (Washington, DC: Michael R. Pompeo, Secretary of State, 13 July 2020).

² Lyle J. Morris, "Blunt Defenders of Sovereignty - The Rise of Coast Guards in East and Southeast Asia," *Naval War College Review* 70, no. 2 (Spring 2017): 79, accessed 12 October 2020. JSTOR.

³ Morris, "Blunt Defenders of Sovereignty," 79.

⁴ Prashanth Parameswaran, "Interview: Understanding Total Competition and China's Challenge in the South China Sea," *The Diplomat*, February 18, 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/02/interview-understanding-total-competition-and-chinas-challenge-in-the-south-china-sea/>.

⁵ Morris, "Blunt Defenders of Sovereignty," 79.

through enforcement of the law.⁶ An armed coast guard ship also allows a nation to exert force with less perceived threat than a naval combatant.⁷

China recognized the importance of this capability, and it expanded and modernized its maritime services.⁸ It now has the world's largest coast guard fleet with more than 260 ships capable of operating throughout the South China Sea.⁹ The CCG's size and capability greatly exceeds all others in the region.¹⁰ Although a separate force, the CCG coordinates and complements the PLA Navy and China's armed militia vessels, thereby providing China with a versatile maritime force that can flexibly operate across the competition continuum.¹¹

The CCG enables China to exercise the facets of sovereignty in the South China Sea, despite the legal illegitimacy of its maritime claims.¹² Sovereignty allows a nation to control access to the sea, which the China Coast Guard facilitates by patrolling disputed areas and deterring access by others.¹³ Sovereignty also allows a nation to regulate use of the sea, which the China accomplishes by banning fishing and seizing equipment in the internationally-recognized waters of others.¹⁴ The CCG also uses aggressive tactics, like ramming vessels, to further deter others from legitimately using disputed areas.¹⁵ This combination of presence,

⁶ Lyle J. Morris, "The Era of Coast Guards in the Asia-Pacific is Upon Us." *The RAND Blog* (blog), *RAND Corporation*, March 8, 2017, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2017/03/the-era-of-coast-guards-in-the-asia-pacific-is-upon.html>.

⁷ Morris, "The Era of Coast Guards."

⁸ Andrew S. Erickson, Joshua Hickey, and Henry Holst, "Surging Second Sea Force: China's Maritime Law-Enforcement Forces, Capabilities, and Future in the Gray Zone and Beyond," *Naval War College Review* 72, 2 (Spring 2019): 12, accessed 10 October 2020. JSTOR.

⁹ Erickson, Hickey, and Holst, 12.

¹⁰ Erickson, Hickey, and Holst, 12; Morris, "Blunt Defenders of Sovereignty," 79.

¹¹ Shinji Yamaguchi, "Strategies of China's Maritime Actors in the South China Sea." *China Perspectives* 2016, no. 3 (2016): 23, accessed 10 October 2020. JSTOR.

¹² Morris, "Blunt Defenders of Sovereignty," 79.

¹³ "China Coast Guard Increases Presence at Scarborough Shoal," *Radio Free Asia*, May 5, 2020, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/coastguard-scarborough-05052020185039.html>.

¹⁴ Drake Long and Jason Gutierrez, "China Coast Guard Patrols Near Philippine-Occupied Second Thomas Shoal," *Radio Free Asia*, April 1, 2020, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/coastguard-shoal-04012020192136.html>.

¹⁵ Morris, "The Era of Coast Guards."; U.S. Department of Defense, "China Coast Guard Sinking of a Vietnam Fishing Vessel," April 9, 2020, accessed 10 October 2020, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/2143925/china-coast-guard-sinking-of-a-vietnam-fishing-vessel/>

deterrence, and the use of force under the guise of law enforcement enables China to effectively exercise control over the South China Sea.¹⁶

COOPERATION THROUGH MARITIME LAW ENFORCEMENT AGREEMENTS

The U.S. can support regional efforts in countering the CCG's aggression by developing cooperative maritime law enforcement agreements with partners.¹⁷ These agreements strengthen strategic partnerships, provide a framework to develop capacity, and promote the rule of law at sea.¹⁸ Maritime law enforcement cooperation advances U.S. global interests by strengthening maritime governance and addressing common security threats, like drug smuggling, counter-proliferation, fisheries conservation, and human trafficking.¹⁹ Currently, the U.S. has more than 60 cooperative law enforcement agreements throughout the world.²⁰

An agreement describes the circumstances by which partners can assist in maritime law enforcement, share information, and exercise another nation's authority to board and search ships suspected of violating the law.²¹ These agreements center around, and reinforce, the principles of international law in the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea, including the flag State's exclusive jurisdiction, sovereignty in the territorial sea, and a State's right to regulate activity, like fishing, in its Exclusive Economic Zone.²² Although agreements differ based on the unique needs of each relationship, common provisions include authority to board ships registered in the partner nation or in its waters, and authority to assist the partner's officials during boardings.²³

¹⁶ Morris, "Blunt Defenders of Sovereignty," 80, 87.

¹⁷ Shawn Lansing, "The Coast Guard Can Reduce Risk in the South China Sea," *United States Naval Institute Proceedings* 143, no. 8 (Aug. 2017): 30, accessed 10 October 2020. JSTOR.

¹⁸ Lansing, "The Coast Guard Can Reduce Risk," 30.

¹⁹ U.S. Coast Guard, "Partnerships," June 12, 2018, accessed 20 October 2020, <https://www.uscg.mil/readings/Article/1548235/partnerships/>.

²⁰ U.S. Coast Guard, "Partnerships."

²¹ Brian R. Robinson, "You Want Authority with That? How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Shipriders," *Coast Guard Proceedings* 66, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 62.

²² Robinson, 62.

²³ Robinson, 63; "Agreement Between the United States of America and Fiji," 12 November 2018, TIAS 18-1112, articles 3-6, *United States Treaties and Other International Agreements* (2018).

Creating cooperative maritime law enforcement agreements with partners in the South China Sea would advance United States policy and counter China's aggression. Agreements provide a diplomatic tool to challenge China's influence by signaling a partnership between the United States and China's regional adversaries.²⁴ Solidifying regional commitments to cooperate against transnational threats and act consistent with international may encourage China to seek similar agreements to resolve its disputes or cooperate against shared threats, like over-fishing.²⁵ Agreements would also allow the U.S. and its partner to build international support for legitimate territorial claims by specifically identifying the areas where the U.S. recognizes a partner's sovereign rights. Finally, cooperative agreements would provide a framework to increase cooperation, capacity-building, and support to a partner's law enforcement capability.²⁶

SHIPRIDER OPERATIONS TO PROMOTE MARITIME GOVERNANCE

After creating an agreement, the U.S. should conduct combined maritime law enforcement operations to challenge the CCG's dominant presence in the South China Sea. In these "shiprider" operation, U.S. ships and personnel assist a partner nation in at-sea patrols and boarding operations.²⁷ Typically, U.S. Coast Guard law enforcement teams accompany a partner nation's officials during boardings.²⁸ They may operate from a partner's ship or a U.S. ship, either Coast Guard or Navy.²⁹ The partner's officials retain authority and jurisdiction for the law enforcement action, while the U.S. provides expertise and hands-on training to support.³⁰

²⁴ Lansing, "The Coast Guard Can Reduce Risk," 29.

²⁵ Lansing, 29; Perry, "Cooperative Maritime Law Enforcement."

²⁶ Robinson, "You Want Authority," 63.

²⁷ Robinson, 63.

²⁸ Robinson, 63.

²⁹ Robinson., 67.

³⁰ Robinson, 63.

The U.S. conducts these operations throughout the world to build capacity, promote the rule of law, and advance maritime governance.³¹ In the Pacific, the Oceania Maritime Security Initiative employs U.S. Coast Guard law enforcement teams, U.S. Navy ships, and law enforcement officials from Pacific Island nations during patrols to conserve marine resources, protect sovereign rights, and build partner nation capacity.³² The Africa Maritime Law Enforcement Partnership advances similar objectives in Africa.³³ Both support the respective Combatant Commander's strategic goals and build upon other engagement initiatives.³⁴

In the South China Sea, combined maritime law enforcement operations would operationalize the United States policy on the region's territorial dispute and counter China's aggression by promoting cooperation and partnership based on the rule of law.³⁵ Combined operations could build upon other capacity-building efforts, like shoreside training and Foreign Military Sales, by providing real-world experience in conducting law enforcement at sea.³⁶ That experience would strengthen maritime governance by promoting, international cooperation, and the interoperability between maritime services.³⁷ Shiprider operations would also strengthen the partner's ability to operate in their waters with additional patrol assets from U.S. ships operating in the region.³⁸ Most importantly, combined operations would signal the U.S.'s commitment to

³¹ Robinson, 63.

³² Michael Buchanan, "'Shipriders' partner with U.S. to secure Pacific Waters," U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Global Public Affairs, July 30, 2018, accessed 10 October 2020, <https://share.america.gov/shipriders-partner-with-u-s-to-secure-pacific-waters/>.

³³ U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa/U.S. 6th Fleet Public Affairs, "First Time Operation Junction Rain Conducted in West Indian Ocean," October 15, 2019, accessed 10 October 2020, <https://www.c6f.navy.mil/Press-Room/News/Article/1988474/first-time-operation-junction-rain-conducted-in-west-indian-ocean/>; Robinson, "You Want Authority," 67.

³⁴ Robinson, "You Want Authority," 67; U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Engagement in the Pacific," Washington, DC: Office of the Spokesperson, U.S. Department of State, September 3, 2018, accessed 12 October 2020, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-engagement-in-the-pacific/>.

³⁵ Lansing, "The Coast Guard Can Reduce Risk," 28.

³⁶ Lansing, 30; Robinson, "You Want Authority," 63.

³⁷ Lansing, "The Coast Guard Can Reduce Risk," 30.

³⁸ Robinson, "You Want Authority," 63; Perry, "Cooperative Maritime Law Enforcement."

regional partners and rules-based maritime governance, which could move China from aggressive competition towards cooperation.³⁹

FOCUSING SUPPORT ON THE PHILIPPINES AND VIETNAM

The U.S. should focus efforts to build coast guard capacity on Vietnam and the Philippines to maximize impact on the CCG's aggression.⁴⁰ These partners need to maintain a strong law enforcement presence in their waters to protect their sovereign rights from China's incursions.⁴¹ Both are positioned to benefit from greater U.S. assistance because they recognize the need to compete with the CCG, maintain existing ties with the U.S., and have signaled a willingness to expand those ties to counter China's influence. Law enforcement agreements and other capacity-building efforts directed at Vietnam and Philippines coast guard capabilities would be strategically-valuable avenue for greater cooperation.⁴²

Vietnam and the Philippines recognize the importance of coast guard capabilities to protect their maritime interests and compete with the CCG for control in the disputed areas.⁴³ Both are expanding their fleets in response to the rapid growth of the CCG.⁴⁴ Each employs their ships in the disputed areas and have shown some willingness to challenge the CCG.⁴⁵ Expanding cooperation with Vietnam and the Philippines through cooperative law enforcement agreements

³⁹ Lansing, "The Coast Guard Can Reduce Risk," 30.

⁴⁰ Morris, "The Era of Coast Guards."

⁴¹ Morris, "The Era of Coast Guards."

⁴² Michael Perry, "Cooperative Maritime Law Enforcement and Overfishing in the South China Sea," *Center for International Maritime Security*, April 6, 2020, <http://cimsec.org/cooperative-maritime-law-enforcement-and-overfishing-in-the-south-china-sea/43227>.

⁴³ Morris, "Blunt Defenders of Sovereignty," 94, 99.

⁴⁴ Morris, 94.

⁴⁵ Enrico Dela Cruz, "Philippines protests China's 'Illicit' Warnings, Coast Guard Conduct," *National Post* (Online), August 21, 2020, <https://nationalpost.com/pmnn/news-pmnn/philippines-protests-chinas-illicit-warnings-coast-guard-conduct>; James Pearson and Khanh Vu, "Vietnam Mulls Legal Action over South China Sea Dispute," *Reuters*, November 6, 2019, accessed 12 October 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-vietnam-southchinasea/vietnam-mulls-legal-action-over-south-china-sea-dispute-idUSKBN1XG1D6>.

and combined operations would complement actions currently being undertaken by those nations to compete with the CCG.

The ties between the U.S. and these two countries also make expanded cooperation in coast guard capacity a productive expansion of the security relationships. Both countries have received former U.S. Coast Guard cutters, highlighting commonality in equipment, training, and tactical law enforcement procedures.⁴⁶ The countries also participate in military exercises, like RIMPAC, and receive security assistance funding from the U.S.⁴⁷ These established military relationships provide a solid foundation upon which to expand cooperation towards strengthening coast guard capabilities.

Vietnam and the Philippines also recognize the value of external partnerships to temper China's coercive regional influence. The relationship between the U.S. and the Philippines varies often based on the Philippines' perception of its relationship with China.⁴⁸ Despite the varying receptiveness to increased cooperation, the U.S. maintains a mutual defense alliance with the Philippines and enjoys popular support in the country for stronger ties.⁴⁹ The Philippines president also recently signaled an interest in strengthening ties with the U.S. and reversed decisions that weakened the military alliance.⁵⁰ Vietnam has shown similar, recent interest in

⁴⁶ Morris, "Blunt Defenders of Sovereignty," 101; U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Security Cooperation with Vietnam," Washington, DC: Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, July 27, 2020, accessed 10 October 2020, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-vietnam-2/>; Frances Mangosing, "3rd Cutter from US to Arrive in PH," *Inquirer.net*, November 30, 2016, <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/150269/3rd-cutter-us-arrive-ph>; U.S. Coast Guard, "Acquisition Update: Coast Guard Transfers Former High Endurance Cutter to Vietnam," May 26, 2017, accessed 10 October 2020, <https://www.dcms.uscg.mil/Our-Organization/Assistant-Commandant-for-Acquisitions-CG-9/Newsroom/EDA052617/>.

⁴⁷ Congressional Research Service, "The Philippines," *In Focus*, June 11, 2020, 2, accessed on 12 October 2020, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10250>; U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Security Cooperation with Vietnam."

⁴⁸ Richard Javad Heydarian, "Duterte Bans Exercises with US in South China Sea," *Asia Times*, August 4, 2020, accessed on 10 October 2020, <https://asiatimes.com/2020/08/duterte-bans-exercises-with-us-in-south-china-sea/>.

⁴⁹ Congressional Research Service, "The Philippines," 2.

⁵⁰ Ankit Panda, "In Sudden Step, Philippines Reverses Course on Ending US Visiting Forces Agreement – For Now," *The Diplomat*, June 4, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/in-sudden-step-philippines-reverses-course-on-ending-us-visiting-forces-agreement-for-now/>.

strengthening its relationship with the U.S. and challenging China.⁵¹ Expanded cooperation in maritime law enforcement provides an opportunity for the U.S. to advance its relationship with these countries, strengthen maritime governance in the South China Sea, and improve the ability for those partner's to challenge China's maritime aggression.

COUNTERARGUMENT: ESCALATION IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

Cooperative maritime law enforcement operations in the South China Sea could prompt escalatory action by the CCG or PLA Navy.⁵² China may be concerned by stronger ties between the U.S. and China's regional adversaries, like Vietnam and the Philippines. It might view combined operations as a direct challenge to China's sovereignty, particularly in the disputed areas.⁵³ China could respond to a larger U.S. military presence by shifting from the CCG to the PLA Navy as the primary tool of aggression in the region.⁵⁴

Although increased cooperation presents some risk of escalation, it is unlikely to lead to an armed conflict. China's strategy is to exercise control through coercion and influence, not armed conflict.⁵⁵ It does not typically use the PLA Navy in maritime altercations in the South China Sea, likely indicating awareness of the escalation risk.⁵⁶ China has also avoided escalation in other maritime competitions.⁵⁷ For example, China faced "peer coast guard" competition in disputes with Japan without escalating to armed conflict.⁵⁸ Instead, China and Japan developed a

⁵¹ David Hutt, "US, Vietnam Ties Have Never Been Better," *Asia Times*, July 13, 2020, accessed on 12 October 2020, <https://asiatimes.com/2020/07/us-vietnam-ties-have-never-been-better/>.

⁵² Lansing, 28; Perry, "Cooperative Maritime Law Enforcement."

⁵³ Perry, "Cooperative Maritime Law Enforcement."

⁵⁴ Yamaguchi, "Strategies of China's Maritime Actors," 25.

⁵⁵ Parameswaran, "Interview: Understanding Total Competition."

⁵⁶ Yamaguchi, "Strategies of China's Maritime Actors," 25.

⁵⁷ Perry, "Cooperative Maritime Law Enforcement."

⁵⁸ Perry, "Cooperative Maritime Law Enforcement"; Jay Tristan Tarriela, "Coast Guards' Role in the South China Sea," *The Diplomat*, November 16, 2018, accessed on 10 October 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/11/coast-guards-role-in-the-south-china-sea/>. ProQuest.; Amanda Hsiao, "Opportunities for Fisheries Enforcement Cooperation in the South China Sea," *Marine Policy*, June 2019, sec. 3.1, accessed 12 October 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2019.103569>.

fisheries agreement to address shared conservation interests, promote cooperation, and avoid escalation.⁵⁹ Increasing the capabilities in the South China Sea might prompt a similar outcome and encourage China to resolve its disputes through its own cooperative agreements.⁶⁰

Mechanisms also exist to reduce the risk of escalation from miscalculations between military vessels.⁶¹ China's military and the U.S. developed the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea ("CUES") to improve communication and reduce this risk of conflict.⁶² Although not all encompassing towards the risks in the South China Sea, particularly involving law enforcement vessels, CUES illustrates a common recognition of the risk posed when military vessels meet at sea and the need to develop procedures to mitigate.⁶³ Expanded U.S. involvement with partners could help prompt China to develop a similar code for the South China Sea that includes law enforcement vessels.⁶⁴

The focus of law enforcement on maritime governance vice military control may also temper China's response.⁶⁵ Unlike a defense alliance or military exercise, combined law enforcement operations do not directly place China as an adversary. These activities focus on transnational threats, like over-fishing or drug trafficking, not adversarial State actors.⁶⁶ China recognizes in other contexts that adversaries can share interests in maritime governance.⁶⁷ For example, China and the U.S. have regularly conducted combined shiprider operations to protect

⁵⁹ Perry, "Cooperative Maritime Law Enforcement."

⁶⁰ Lansing, "The Coast Guard Can Reduce Risk," 30; Perry, "Cooperative Maritime Law Enforcement."

⁶¹ Lansing, "The Coast Guard Can Reduce Risk," 27; Ankit, Panda, "Unplanned Encounters in the South China Sea: Under Control?," *The Diplomat*, January 25, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/01/unplanned-encounters-in-the-south-china-sea-under-control/>.

⁶² Panda, "Unplanned Encounters in the South China Sea."

⁶³ Lansing, "The Coast Guard Can Reduce Risk," 27; Hoang Thi Ha, "Making the CUES work in the South China Sea," *Today*, September 7, 2016, <https://www.todayonline.com/commentary/making-cues-code-work-south-china-sea>.

⁶⁴ Lansing, "The Coast Guard Can Reduce Risk," 27; Hoang Thi Ha, "Making the CUES Work."

⁶⁵ Lansing, "The Coast Guard Can Reduce Risk," 30; Tarriela, "Coast Guard's Role."

⁶⁶ Robinson, "You Want Authority," 63; Tarriela, "Coast Guard's Role."

⁶⁷ Tarriela, "Coast Guard's Role."

fisheries in the North Pacific since 1993.⁶⁸ Rather than prompting escalation towards armed conflict, cooperative maritime law enforcement in the South China Sea might encourage China and the CCG to seek similar avenues to cooperate with others in the region.⁶⁹

Most importantly, the U.S. can exercise a cooperative agreement in a manner that mitigates risks and responds to China's aggression or adherence to international norms. At the low end, simply concluding an agreement with a regional partner sends a diplomatic signal and provides strategic benefits with no risk of an at sea confrontation. The U.S. can also exercise the agreement without risk of a maritime encounter by focusing on shoreside training, information sharing, and ISR support to provide maritime domain awareness. These activities strengthen a partner's law enforcement capacity and message support without directly involving U.S. ships in a potentially escalatory boarding.

The U.S. could also mitigate risks during at sea operations. A shiprider operation could initially operate outside of the disputed areas where there is a low risk of an escalatory encounter with CCG ships. The U.S. could also use a U.S. Coast Guard cutter as a shiprider platform, which China might perceive as a lower threat than U.S. Navy combatant.⁷⁰ These steps together provide a flexible and scalable means to achieve operational and strategic goals, while balancing risks in light of geopolitical considerations and China's maritime behavior.

CONCLUSION

Strong maritime governance protects all nations from shared threats, like over-fishing and transnational crime, and it requires international cooperation, professional coast guards, and a shared commitment to rules-based order.⁷¹ The CCG's aggression in the South China Sea and its

⁶⁸ Robinson, "You Want Authority," 66.

⁶⁹ Lansing, "The Coast Guard Can Reduce Risk," 30. Perry, "Cooperative Maritime Law Enforcement"; Hsiao, "Opportunities for Fisheries Enforcement Cooperation," sec. 3.1.

⁷⁰ Lansing, "The Coast Guard Can Reduce Risk," 29.

⁷¹ Lansing, 30; Tarriela, "Coast Guard's Role."

illegitimate enforcement activity undermines the ability to strengthen maritime governance and protect shared resources in the South China Sea.⁷² As a result, regional partners need to counter the CCG with their own maritime capability to protect their sovereign rights, promote the rule of law, and foster greater cooperation.

The U.S. can help its partners develop stronger maritime law enforcement capability by developing cooperative agreements, especially with Vietnam and the Philippines.⁷³ These agreements provide a time-tested mechanism to build capacity, foster strategic partnerships, and promote maritime governance.⁷⁴ These agreements would build upon established relationships, complement existing capacity-building efforts, and provide an operational step to advance U.S. policy in the region. These agreements would provide a framework to expand support to maritime law enforcement operations, including information sharing, assistance with maritime domain awareness, and combined patrols and boardings.

Strengthening the maritime law enforcement capability of regional partners would help focus the South China Sea competition around shared interests, like protecting fish stocks, and building maritime governance on professional, internationally-legitimate law enforcement.⁷⁵ While China could choose to escalate in response, it has chosen cooperation in other areas of maritime governance.⁷⁶ U.S. support to the rule of law through cooperative maritime law enforcement may provide a catalyst to change China's maritime behavior in favor of cooperative, rules-based norms.

⁷² Morris, "The Era of Coast Guards."

⁷³ Lansing, "The Coast Guard Can Reduce Risk," 30. Perry, "Cooperative Maritime Law Enforcement."

⁷⁴ Robinson, "You Want Authority," 63.

⁷⁵ Perry, "Cooperative Maritime Law Enforcement"; Lansing, "The Coast Guard Can Reduce Risk," 30; Tarriela, "Coast Guard's Role."

⁷⁶ Robinson, "You Want Authority," 67; Lansing, "The Coast Guard Can Reduce Risk," 29.

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