

**The Future of Surface Warfare in Countering Chinese Military Activity
in the South China Sea**

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

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1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 09-05-2022		2. REPORT TYPE FINAL		3. DATES COVERED (From - To) N/A	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE The Future of Surface Warfare in Countering Chinese Military Activity in the South China Sea				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER N/A	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER N/A	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER N/A	
6. AUTHOR(S) Daphne Rose Marsh				5d. PROJECT NUMBER N/A	
				5e. TASK NUMBER N/A	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER N/A	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Writing & Teaching Excellence Center Naval War College 686 Cushing Road Newport, RI 02841-1207				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER N/A	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) N/A				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S) N/A	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S) N/A	
12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Distribution Statement A: Approved for public release; Distribution is unlimited.					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES A submitted to the faculty of the NWC in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the curriculum. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the NWC or the Department of the Navy.					
14. ABSTRACT An analysis of the future of Surface Warfare to counter Chinese aggression and expansion in the South China Sea.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS (Key words) South China Sea, Surface Warfare					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT N/A	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON Director, Writing Center
a. REPORT UNCLASSIFIED	b. ABSTRACT UNCLASSIFIED	c. THIS PAGE UNCLASSIFIED			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (include area code) 401-841-6499

INTRODUCTION

The free flow of commerce and freedom of navigation through the South China Sea (SCS) significantly impacts security and stability in the INDOPACOM area of operations. Around 3.4 trillion U.S. dollars of goods transits these waters each year, and “many U.S. allies and partners are highly dependent on both the commerce...and the resources...that can be extracted from it.”¹ Indeed, restrictions on economic activity in the region pose a significant threat to prosperity and security for U.S. partners in the region. The U.S. has responded to this reality in recent decades with a policy centered on freedom of navigation. INDOPACOM strategy commits to upholding “a free and open Indo-Pacific in which all nations...are secure in their sovereignty and able to pursue economic growth consistent with accepted international rules...”² INDOPACOM’s policy reflects a reaction to expanding Chinese maritime claims in the South China Sea that are inconsistent with international laws and customs. Beijing has constructed man-made military infrastructure atop coral reefs and infringed on the internationally recognized economic rights of other nations within the South China Sea. This dynamic will continue to threaten stability and security in INDOPACOM into the future.

U.S. decision makers have a variety of tools available to enforce freedom of navigation policy to counter Beijing’s incremental expansion across the South China Sea. Within the realm of military tools, Surface Warfare strategy has a significant role to play in this disputed maritime domain. To ensure a free and open INDOPACOM in the future, Surface Warfare strategy must provide a long-term counter to Chinese military expansion in the South China Sea, centered on employment of U.S. warships to contain Beijing’s maritime claims, a return to a distributed

¹ (Cooper, 2018)

² (Defense, 2019)

lethality mindset via sustained Surface Action Group (SAG) deployments, and expanded U.S. bases of operation in INDOPACOM to support surface ships.

SURFACE WARFARE AND CONTAINMENT STRATEGY IN THE SCS

Employing U.S Surface Forces to actively contain Chinese maritime claims in the South China Sea will align Surface Warfare strategy with INDOPACOM policy by effectively enforcing freedom of navigation and upholding international law in the region.

Surface Warfare freedom of navigation operations contribute to overall containment strategy in the region to counter China's influence. China's man-made infrastructure in the South China Sea includes 3,200 acres of civilian and military projects in the Spratly Islands alone, to include airfields, radars, and point defense systems, among others. Additionally, China has consistently demonstrated unacceptable unilateral enforcement of their own restrictions on economic activity throughout the South China Sea in violation of international law.³

Cooper and Brand present four varied proposals for U.S. strategy in the South China Sea: rollback, containment, offset, and accommodation. The authors highlight how “[*containment strategy*] accepts Chinese gains made to date, in recognition of just how difficult and dangerous it would be to reverse those gains, but draws the line firmly—including by threat or use of military force—against further advances.”⁴ Containment combined with offset strategy across diplomatic, information, military, and economic channels has the potential to deter China from expanding its influence further in the South China Sea. The U.S. Surface Navy is the tip of the spear when it comes to the threat and use of military force to counter any further advances of Chinese territorial claims in INOPACOM. Military lines of effort for U.S. strategy in the South China Sea would be only one consideration for decision makers. As argued by Cooper and

³ (Cooper, 2018, p. 3)

⁴ (Cooper, 2018, p. 2)

Brand, military containment tools should be combined with aspects of offset strategy using diplomatic and non-military sources of national power to achieve policy aims: "...the United States should contain the most destabilizing Chinese activities while offsetting and penalizing less threatening behavior."⁵ The focus of Surface Warfare lines of effort in recent years have centered on containment strategy through freedom of navigation operations—operations that will prove increasingly vital and demand a capable, flexible, deterrent Surface Force in the future as China continues to grow its military capabilities.

The ability to contain further Chinese encroachment into the South China Sea has significant implications for the future of U.S. geopolitical influence—to maintain a world order where the U.S. and partner nations promote “freedom of navigation...and face down challenges...to stability and order.”⁶ This U.S. ideal is juxtaposed with China’s demonstrated disregard for international law and destabilizing maritime restrictions in the South China Sea. Surface Warfare operations will continue to play a key role in practice to facing down these challenges. In order to truly achieve INDOPACOM objectives for a free and open INDOPACOM, theater-level rhetoric must clearly articulate that the U.S. Surface Navy is prepared to deliver consequences to further expansion of China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea.

In recent years, Surface Warfare containment operations have focused around deployment of Surface Action Groups, Carrier Strike Groups, and Expeditionary Strike Groups to conduct operations in the vicinity of Chinese-claimed island shoals. The inaugural Pacific Surface Action Group deployed in the summer of 2016 to the South China Sea to conduct freedom of navigation operations. China “backed away from a planned effort to begin land

⁵ (Cooper, 2018, p. 16)

⁶ (Cooper, 2018, p. 4)

reclamation [at the Scarborough Shoal] after U.S. officials issued explicit, high-level warnings that doing so might disrupt seriously the Sino-American bilateral relationship.”⁷ Bolstered by clear diplomatic language, employment of the Surface Action Group successfully contained and countered Chinese military activity in the South China Sea. This containment strategy via Surface Action Group freedom of navigation patrols should be a sustained effort and combined with a return to a distributed lethality mindset for surface warfare operations in the South China Sea in order to see strategic effects of operations to contain and deter China.

SUSTAINED OPS & A DISTRIBUTED LETHALITY MINDSET IN THE SCS

A sustained presence of Surface Action Groups in the South China Sea combined with a clear distributed lethality mindset has historical precedence for deterring China and requires minimal additional investment to make an immediate impact on INDOPACOM’s objectives.

An agile Surface Force employed with a distributed lethality mentality empowers U.S. commanders to “[impose] localized sea control when and where it is required”—an appropriate strategy to counter China’s area denial operations in the South China Sea.⁸ The distributed lethality mindset for Surface Warfare operations focuses on countering anti-access/area-denial environments with agile, flexible, multi-mission capable Surface Action Groups armed with offensive weapons that force the adversary to disperse his own forces and resources.⁹ In practice, a Surface Action Group is typically comprised of three destroyers, cruisers, littoral combat ships, or a combination of the three. These ships are fully mission capable across more than twenty mission areas to provide Fleet Commanders maximum flexibility across a wide swath of an area of operations.

⁷ (Cooper, 2018, p. 9)

⁸ (Rowden, Gumataotao, & Fanta, January 2015)

⁹ (Rowden, Gumataotao, & Fanta, January 2015, pp. par. 1-2)

Freedom of navigation operations via distributed lethality-minded Surface Action Groups will provide the greatest impact to contain China if the operations are a sustained effort. This has not been the case in recent years. Surface Action Group deployments pop up in international news sporadically. By comparison, Surface Action Groups and distributed lethality occupied the center of Surface Warfare strategy for the INDOPACIFIC in the mid-2010s. Their capability to bridge gaps in theater security has not changed since then. The primacy of the INDOPACOM theater to U.S. interests and increasing capabilities of the Chinese Fleet require increased commitment of maritime assets to address security challenges in the region. Allocation of Surface Fleet assets specifically to the South China Sea must reflect the capability to meet INDOPACOM objectives and deter China.

A return to an emphasis on distributed lethality in Surface Warfare operations also provides U.S. decision makers with increased flexibility to use established and funded Surface Warfare programs to achieve INDOPACOM policy aims. Surface Action Group deployments have already seen successful achievement of INDOPACOM goals utilizing Arleigh Burke class guided missile destroyers with standard weapons loadouts to achieve localized sea control in the South China Sea as envisioned by the decision makers who proposed the shift to an offensive mindset in their 2015 Proceedings article.¹⁰ While innovation can amplify established capabilities in the long run, the Surface Force is equipped today to make an immediate impact to achieve INDOPACOM security goals with a Surface Warfare strategy refocused on a distributed lethality mindset.

The distributed lethality Surface Action Group construct also importantly incorporates partner nations into theater security efforts. Recent INDOPACOM strategy emphasizes the

¹⁰ (Rowden, Gumataotao, & Fanta, January 2015)

critical importance of partnerships to maintaining stability and security in the region. Many U.S. partners in INDOPACOM are capable of augmenting a U.S. Surface Action Group conducting freedom of navigation patrols. For example, The U.S. and Japan recently formed a Surface Action Group in the South China Sea to “practice a range of Surface Warfare tactics.”¹¹ This multi-national Surface Action Group construct provides significant opportunities in the future to build Surface Warfare interoperability with partner nations and to further offset Chinese aggression in the South China Sea. U.S. forces can continue to consistently lead exercises with these partners to build capability of a credible deterrent coalition ready to enforce international law.

EXPAND SURFACE SHIP BASES OF OPERATIONS IN THE SCS

A Surface Force operating over 7,000 miles from home, prepared to take decisive action to contain further Chinese maritime expansion in the South China Sea requires a network of maintenance support. Expanding bases of operation in INDOPACOM for the Surface Fleet can provide the support necessary for Surface Forces to carry out containment operations and deter Chinese aggression in the region.

Sustained containment operations in the South China Sea will require access to maintenance facilities in the immediate area. Most U.S. warships conducting patrols in the South China Sea today require a transit to Japan to address intermediate or depot level repairs. The transit time to and from Japan limits the otherwise maximum flexibility provided by Surface Action Groups to the theater commander. This reality limits the credibility of sustained freedom of navigation operations. The maintenance capability gap will grow as China continues to spread the Chinese Communist Party’s economic influence across the globe, including in the Pacific

¹¹ (Chatmas, 2021)

region. U.S. investment in facilities—including surface ship maintenance depots—provides operational and economic benefits to the U.S., our regional partners, and provides an offset to Chinese economic influence in the South China Sea. Maintenance facilities for U.S. surface ships nearby the South China Sea manned and equipped to handle significant repairs will enable sustained, continuous Surface Action Group patrols.

Additionally, the presence of U.S. forces on bases controlled by the U.S. or regional partners can “discourage aggressive Chinese moves,” providing a deterrent to any further expansion of China’s nine-dash-line beyond the status quo if implemented decisively and strategically.¹² The presence of U.S. warships and aircraft have deterred China in the past from continuing aggressive actions in the South China Sea—as demonstrated in 2014 when China discontinued blocking supplies sent to Philippine marines only after the U.S. launched surveillance aircraft to monitor the situation.¹³ Building an expanded network of bases of operations around the South China Sea can ensure “that America and its friends maintain the military superiority and escalation dominance necessary to make containment credible.”¹⁴

COUNTER ARGUMENT: SURFACE ACTION GROUPS VS. CARRIER STRIKE GROUPS

Some may argue that future Surface Warfare strategy to counter China in the South China Sea should continue to focus on the Carrier Strike Group—or even dual-Carrier Strike Group—operations in the South China Sea as opposed to a return to principles of distributed lethality. Some strategists argue that aircraft carriers best showcase American’s commitment to the region because they are the center of U.S. maritime operations. This argument recognizes the strategic

¹² (Cooper, 2018, p. 8)

¹³ (Cooper, 2018, p. 9)

¹⁴ (Cooper, 2018, p. 9)

impact of carrier deployments and port visits to our partners around the globe. U.S. Navy aircraft carriers are unmatched in their capability to project power and spread good will to our allies.

Recent years have seen significant challenges in the Surface Forces community to deploy carriers on time and sustain their operations. Deployment extensions, systemic maintenance delays on home-cycle, and the inability for carriers to conduct extensive repairs abroad have each contributed to this trend. In response to this challenge, U.S. Surface Forces recently deployed a four ship Surface Action Group in place of USS Harry S. Truman (CVN 75) when the carrier could not deploy on time due to maintenance.¹⁵ Surface Action Groups provide a ready alternative to Fleet commanders in the absence of available aircraft carriers.

Additionally, Surface Action Groups provide agility and diversity of mission that is not possible with a Carrier Strike Group. The focus of the Carrier Strike Group is the carrier—protecting her so that she can launch and recover aircraft to achieve the mission. The focus of the Surface Action Group is agility. The Surface Action Group has the flexibility to project power into the littorals. The force can split up without fear of leaving a high value unit exposed. Each platform is capable of defending herself and lethal against a threat from the air, land, or sea.

Employment of Carrier Strike Groups in the South China Sea should not exclude nor eclipse the importance of sustained Surface Action Group deployments. The presence of both sends a clear message to China about the U.S. long-term interest in deterring violations of international law in the region.

CONCLUSION

China is “making a concerted drive for regional primacy” within INDOPACOM.¹⁶ The goal posts of the nation’s nine-dash-line continue to expand year by year. This reality poses a

¹⁵ (Faram, 2021)

¹⁶ (Cooper, 2018, p. 2)

significant threat to security and stability in INDOPACOM because China's actions are not aligned with international standards for the rule of the law. If China's military expansion in the South China Sea continues at its current pace unchecked, the Chinese Communist Party will eventually feel empowered to set and enforce its own set of regional laws in the unilateral interest of the Party. These laws would further restrict the free flow of goods worldwide and block access for regional nations to reap economic benefits from fishing and offshore oil—all of which would serve the interests of China.

As Cooper and Brands note, however, “China may be increasingly assertive, but only when it believes it can advance without encountering serious resistance.”¹⁷ This is where U.S. Surface Forces have a primary role to play in countering China's expanding claims in the maritime domain—providing resistance. Employment of distributed, lethal forces, bolstered by clear diplomatic language, supported by an expanded network of bases of operations can contain and deter China from controlling the South China Sea in the future. A distributed lethality containment strategy for Surface Warfare aligns with INDOPACOM's free and open policy while avoiding the risks involved with employing Surface Forces to rollback China's territorial claims.

¹⁷ (Cooper, 2018, p. 9)