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The US government must change the game by placing more assertive naval power options on the table in the South China Sea as part of its whole-of-government approach. In order to avoid a full-scale conflict, US naval power must demonstrate the ability to control access, perform combined expeditionary warfare training with allies and partners, and conduct contested freedom of navigation operations. America must demonstrate the capacity and will to drive stability. China's current strategic trends present an unacceptable balance of power that could lead to the loss of US influence in the in the Pacific and imperil the global economy.

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**NAVAL POWER-PLAYS IN THE FIGHT
FOR THE SOUTH CHINA SEA**

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OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Title:** Naval Power-Plays in the Fight for the South China Sea
- Author:** Andrew M. Imperatore, Lieutenant Commander, United States Navy
- Thesis:** The US government must change the game by placing more assertive naval power options on the table in the South China Sea (SCS) as part of its whole-of-government approach. In order to avoid a full-scale conflict, US naval power must demonstrate the ability to control access to the SCS, perform combined expeditionary warfare training with allies and partners, and conduct contested freedom of navigation operations.
- Discussion:** Since the end of the World War II, Chinese claims of exclusive historic rights have evolved to include the entire SCS. Many nations contest these claims but have limited military power to challenge China. US naval forces have a significant role to play in compelling a shift in China's behavior and preventing it from dominating one of the world's most vital sea lanes. By demonstrating firm sea control of strategic chokepoints, the US is aiming its message directly at the heart of China's fear of containment. In addition, by enhancing expeditionary capabilities through training with allies and partners, the US will reassure regional stakeholders that America will support them in the future. Conducting multinational exercises like *RIMPAC* near the SCS and advancing security cooperation with Vietnam are two important elements required to shape the narrative of international support and legitimacy. Lastly, the US must show that it can sustain freedom of navigation in increasingly contested environments, particularly near the Spratly Islands. By shifting the focus from politically sensitive areas to enforcement of international norms, the US will drive an advantageous precedent of open skies and seas. Although China will undoubtedly protest these lines of effort, the risks of escalation are both predictable and manageable. Each action sends a distinct message to China as well as the international community to respect the themes of UNCLOS.
- Conclusions:** America must demonstrate the capacity and will to drive stability in the SCS. China's current strategic trends present an unacceptable balance of power that could lead to the loss of US influence in the Pacific and imperil the flow of global trade. The US government should see the SCS as an opportunity to support international law, firm-up traditional friendships, and build new relationships to meet twenty-first century challenges. While this research has focused extensively on the role of naval power, there are opportunities for additional research into the ways in which other levers of power can make a positive contribution to achieving strategic goals. As the world's strongest superpower, America must be prepared to meet these challenges head-on and maintain its competitive posture while minimizing the risks of a great power conflict.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Illustrations	vi
Tables	vii
Abbreviations and Acronyms	viii
Preface.....	ix
Acknowledgements.....	x
Chapter 1. Century of the Rising Dragon.....	1
The Problem of China’s Rise	1
Assumptions	3
Limitations/Scope	4
Chapter 2. The Gathering Storm: China’s Revisionist Worldview	6
Modern Origins of Chinese Claims: The Mystery of the Nine-Dash Line	6
Policy and Strategy	12
Motivation.....	18
Chapter 3. America’s Strategic Choices.....	21
State of Strategy	21
Making Cost Imposition Work: Lessons from the Past and Present	22
Chapter 4. Sending the Message: Naval Options in the SCS	26
Sea Control of Key Maritime Terrain	26
Combined Expeditionary Warfare Training	33
Contested Freedom of Navigation Operations.....	39
Chapter 5. Conclusions and Recommendations	45
Appendix.....	47
Notes	51
Bibliography	58

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1. Mischief Reef Then and Now.....	1
Figure 2. Competing Claims in the SCS	6
Figure 3. Original 1947 Eleven-Dash Line Compared to Contemporary Nine-Dash Line	9
Figure 4. Energy Resources in the SCS	15
Figure 5. Fiery Cross Reef in the Spratly Islands	16
Figure 6. Key Maritime Terrain of the SCS	27
Figure 7. Chinese H-6 Bomber Flies Patrol in SCS (2016)	29
Figure 8. USNS <i>Impeccable</i> Incident (2009).....	31
Figure 9. <i>RIMPAC</i> 2018 in Hawaiian OPAREA	35
Figure 10. Damaged EP-3 on Hainan Island (2001).....	42

TABLES

Table 1. SCS Major Incidents (1946-Present)47

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

A2/AD	Anti-Access/Area Denial
ASEAN	Association for Southeast Asian Nations
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CPC	Communist Party Congress
CSG	Carrier Strike Group
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
ESG	Expeditionary Strike Group
DIME	Diplomatic, Intelligence, Military, and Economic levers of power
FONOPS	Freedom of Navigation Operations
MOE	Measure of Effectiveness
NDL	Nine-Dash Line
<i>NSS</i>	<i>National Security Strategy of the United States of America</i>
PCA	Permanent Court of Arbitration
PLAAF	People's Liberation Army Air Force
PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy
PRC	People's Republic of China
SRO	Special Reconnaissance Operations
SCS	South China Sea
SLOC	Sea Line of Communication
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention Law of the Sea (1982)
USN	United States Navy

PREFACE

The simmering contest in the South China Sea is America's most critical 21st century national security dilemma. The consequences of inaction or action could not be greater in this superpower struggle, and there are no strategic choices that will satisfy all sides. The US is the most capable advocate for an international community that depends on the openness of the sea to advance the globalized world economy. On the other side, China has political and economic needs combined with a revisionist worldview that seeks to change the rules-based order that has existed since the end of World War II. In the end, this potential fight will fall largely on the shoulders of American naval forces. If the US desires to maintain its status as the world's greatest superpower, then it must communicate both the capability for action and the willingness to bear the responsibility before competition devolves into great power conflict.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research represents the brave work of the men and women with whom I have spent a career fighting in the air and ruling the sea. I would like to thank the officers and sailors of the World Infamous Gauntlets of Electronic Attack Squadron ONE THREE SIX. I am convinced that there has never been a more talented band of warriors than *Team Ironclaw*. For my wingmen, we were always professional in the brief, lethal in the air, and legends everywhere else. I will be forever grateful for your friendship.

I would also like to thank Dr. Yung for his sage guidance and mentorship. Without your expertise, this research would not have made it off the ground. I appreciate the many discussions we shared in the hopes of finding realistic solutions to a rapidly evolving challenge for US national security.

Most importantly, this project is for my son, Trajan. I want you to lead a prosperous life of strength, honor, and adventure. Find your passions, see the world with a sense of wonder, and live boldly on your own terms. Keep all options on the table. The real world is very gray, and life hits us all sometimes. Find a way or make a way to hit back hard when opportunity knocks.

*Since love and fear can hardly exist together,
if we must choose between them,
it is far safer to be feared than loved.*

~ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*

CHAPTER 1 CENTURY OF THE RISING DRAGON



Figure 1: Mischief Reef Then and Now—2012 (Left), 2017 (Right).

Source: Reuters Photo File, “US Destroyer Challenges China’s Claims in the South China Sea,” <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/us-destroyer-challenges-chinas-claims-in-south-china-sea-1736185>.

The Problem of China’s Rise

The potential for a great power fight is smoldering in the South China Sea (SCS) and may ignite if the People’s Republic of China (PRC) continues on its current course. The 2017 *National Security Strategy (NSS) of the United States* implies a broad competitive space between stability and great power conflict, the limits of which need to be explored if the US desires to maintain its influence and freedom of action in the Pacific.¹ The SCS has become the symbol of a changing global system, where the PRC’s expanding maritime claims are challenging the rules-based order that has existed since the end of World War II. If the world allows the PRC to

declare exclusive rights in a region that has been a contested but open sea lane, it will imperil freedom of action to all nations that share an interest in global commerce and set a negative legal precedent. Although there have been heated exchanges over the past seventy years (see Table 2 in Appendix), mostly between regional actors such as Vietnam, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei, stability and restraint chiefly defined the norm until the mid-1990s when factions within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) started driving a more nationalist and revisionist message. Unfortunately, the diverse bureaucratic politics within the CCP make its nine-dash line (NDL) legal positions challenging to define because they do not necessarily represent a unitary position.² Nevertheless, building airfields and radar sites in the contested Spratly Islands, island reclamation activities, and the brazen seizure of Scarborough Shoal from the Philippines in 2012 make the PRC's actions unjustifiable, a judgement that the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) at the Hague upheld in a unanimous 2016 decision.³ Although the PRC has tried to shape world opinion by wrapping overt military capability under a blanket of benign intent, its actions threaten \$5.3 trillion in global commerce through the world's busiest sea lanes and contest America's regional credibility.⁴

After the PRC occupied Mischief Reef (see figure 1) in late 1994, the United States Government (USG) made its first statements about the emerging crisis during a May 1995 State Department daily briefing, which highlighted five key positions that remain the cornerstones of US policy to this day: “(1) peaceful resolution of disputes, (2) peace and stability, (3) freedom of navigation, (4) neutrality over questions of sovereignty and competing claims, and (5) respect of maritime norms, especially the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).”⁵ Since Mischief Reef, PRC territorial expansion and island reclamation has

accelerated and become more militarized. In contrast, US policy has only nominally evolved in language while being consistently unpersuasive in execution. Across four presidential administrations, the USG has remained unwilling to raise the stakes high enough to compel a politically acceptable change in behavior. Nineteenth century British philosopher, John S. Mill, reminds us that “war is an ugly thing, but not the ugliest of things. The decayed and degraded state of moral and patriotic feeling which thinks nothing worth war is worse.”⁶ The USG must change the game by placing more assertive naval power options on the table as part of its whole-of-government approach. In order to avoid a full-scale conflict, naval power must demonstrate the ability to control access to the SCS, perform combined expeditionary warfare training with allies and partners, and conduct contested freedom of navigation operations for the benefit of the global community.

Assumptions

Analysis of naval activities in the SCS requires an understanding of three key assumptions about the principal military actors. First, the USG and PRC are rational actors that desire to remain in a state of competition and avoid escalation into a large-scale conflict.⁷ The window of competition extends to routine and professional interactions between the PRC and US military ships and aircraft with due regard outside of internationally recognized territorial waters and airspace. All interactions must conform to UNCLOS to sustain multilateral support.

Moreover, as part of its national strategy, the PRC will continue to employ deception, economic and political coercion, diplomacy, law, and public opinion in an attempt to diminish US influence and credibility in the region. Despite the Hague’s ruling against its maritime

claims, the PRC will remain undeterred and unlikely to change its behavior in response to current levels of pressure.⁸

Although China has become a more responsible economic actor since becoming a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, its actions in the SCS represent a departure from expectations. The *NSS* addresses the position that “these competitions require the US to rethink the policies of the past two decades—policies based on the assumption that engagement with rivals and their inclusion in international institutions and global commerce would turn them into benign actors and trustworthy partners. For the most part, this premise turned out to be false.”⁹ As a consequence, the US must commit to more forceful action to compel a positive change in the strategic balance of power.

Cautiously, any military actions should also provide off-ramps to prevent irreversible escalation. Although the intent of raising tensions is to produce a desirable strategic reaction from the PRC, that reaction should bend towards compliance with international law. US military options should not attempt to trip PRC strategic red-lines or drive the US and its allies into armed conflict without sufficient flexibility to pull back from the brink.

Limitations/Scope

Any efforts to drive lasting change in the SCS will require a cohesive national strategy based on a whole-of-government approach. While this research focuses solely on demonstrating credible naval power, all courses of action should amplify the other levers of US influence to reach the desired outcome. Accordingly, the *NSS* places special emphasis on the importance of multilateral relationships, allies, and partners in securing US national policy objectives. Although

the focus of this research is limited to the military scope, it does so in coordination with diplomatic, economic, and intelligence efforts to create enduring stability.¹⁰

We will never allow anyone, any organization, or any political party, at any time or in any form, to separate any part of Chinese territory from China.

~ President Xi Jinping, People's Republic of China, 2017

CHAPTER 2 THE GATHERING STORM: CHINA'S REVISIONIST WORLDVIEW

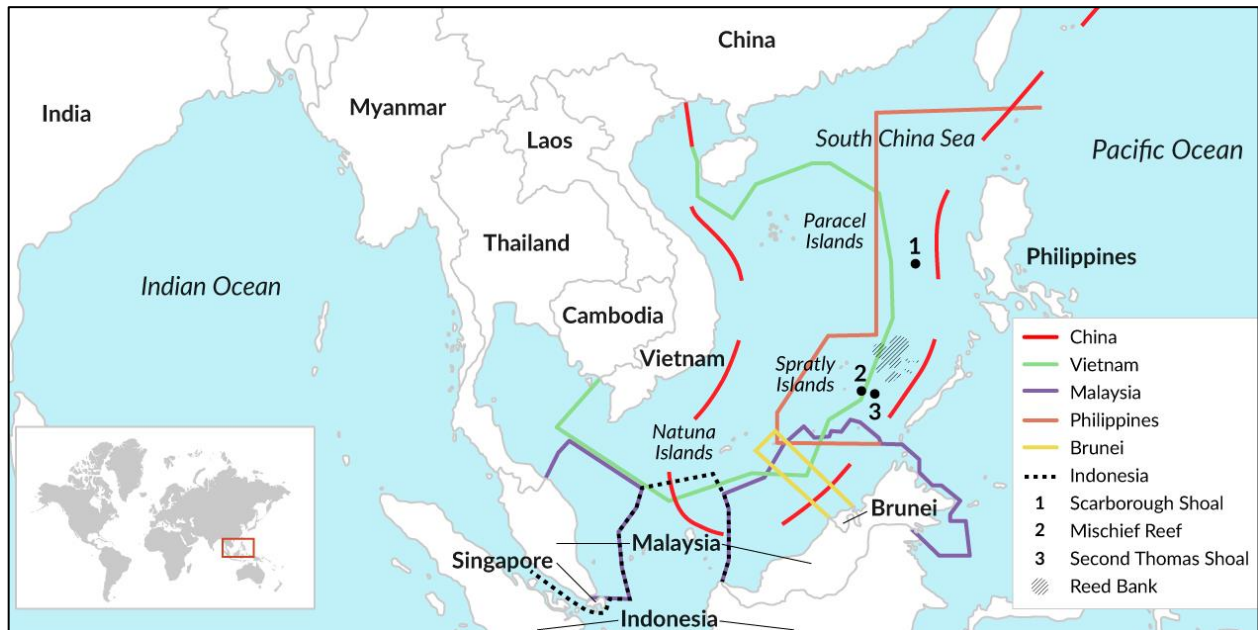


Figure 2: Competing Claims in the SCS.

Source: “Geopolitical Intelligence Services Dossier: The South China Sea,” March 8, 2018, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/gis-dossier-the-south-china-sea,defense,2488.html#modal>.

Modern Origins of PRC Claims: The Mystery of the Nine-Dash Line

Applying effective US power to challenge the PRC’s SCS claims, depicted in figure 2, requires a firm understanding of how the Chinese view has evolved since the end of World War II. Its increasingly aggressive positions are indicators of the larger PRC policy goals and strategies. China’s revisionist ideology—its view that the international order has been unjust towards its rightful place in the world—was born from the nationalist sentiment that arose from the nineteenth century, in part, due to a series of unjust treaties between the West and the Qing

Dynasty. However, China's leaders have appropriated and extrapolated that historical memory into a politically advantageous narrative.

The Chinese collective sense of identity is a major factor for its modern claims and, in large part, helps to explain the PRC's motivations. Historian Thongchai Winichakul best describes this phenomenon in his concept of a "geo-body." Thongchai explains, "A nation's territory is not simply a sizeable piece of the earth's surface... Geographically speaking, the geo-body of a nation occupies a certain position of the earth's surface which is objectively identifiable. It appears to be concrete to the eyes as if its existence does not depend upon any act of imagining. That, of course, is not the case."¹¹ In the *constructivist*¹² perspective, shared identity is more important than the lines on a map. In a May 2018 article, "Modern Origins of China's South China Sea Claims," Bill Hayton amplifies this theory by arguing that "a collective Chinese belief in a historic claim to the reefs and rocks therein emerged in distinct episodes of the twentieth century, partly in response to perceived threats but mainly as attempts to shore up declining nationalist legitimacy."¹³ Convincingly, the Chinese constructed a narrative based on belief and emotion during a time of foreign incursions and internal instability.

Since the end of World War II, the Chinese have been redrawing maps, redefining borders, claiming historic rights, and using every means of coercion to spread their message. China's evolving self-narrative has increased the risk of conflict, and the US must take more assertive action to preserve the current world order. Prior to 1946, the Chinese government made no mention of any specific claims over SCS waters or islands. On September 25, 1946, the Nationalist government under Chiang Kai-Shek convened a meeting with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of National Defense, and Navy General Headquarters to discuss the SCS islands.¹⁴ Following this meeting, the government published the

first map of its claims in 1947, shown in figure 3, with the original Eleven-Dash Line.¹⁵ At the time, the Republic of China (ROC) made the first references to the idea of making the islands part of China's sovereign territory even though no such legal status had ever existed; still, there was no discussion of sovereign maritime rights. Quite to the contrary, the existence of this map provides evidence that Chinese claims are a creation of the twentieth century, which puts its contemporary legal positions into more accurate context.

After the communists took power in 1949 under Mao Zedong, the new government adopted most of the Nationalist claims. However, as part of negotiations with Hanoi in 1957, the PRC ceded Bailongwei Island in the Gulf of Tonkin to the Communist government of North Vietnam and subsequently removed two dashes from the map to create the contemporary NDL.¹⁶ Then, in 1958, Mao's government published the "Declaration on the Territorial Sea" which claimed that "the PRC shall have a twelve nautical mile territorial sea including the Chinese mainland and its coastal islands, as well as Taiwan, the Penghu Islands, the *Dongsha* (Prata) Islands, the *Xisha* (Paracel) Islands, the *Zhongsha* Islands (collective name for partially submerged reefs), the *Nansha* (Spratly) Islands, and all other islands belonging to China which are separated from the mainland and its coastal islands by the high seas."¹⁷ Despite its territorial ambitions, the PRC made a striking admission: it understood that the high seas separated its mainland widely from the majority of SCS islands. In this context, even though the term 'high seas,' which carries legal significance, was likely meant in a figurative or symbolic sense, China made no mention of exclusive or historic maritime sovereignty over the SCS because there was no justifiable precedent for such a claim under international law.

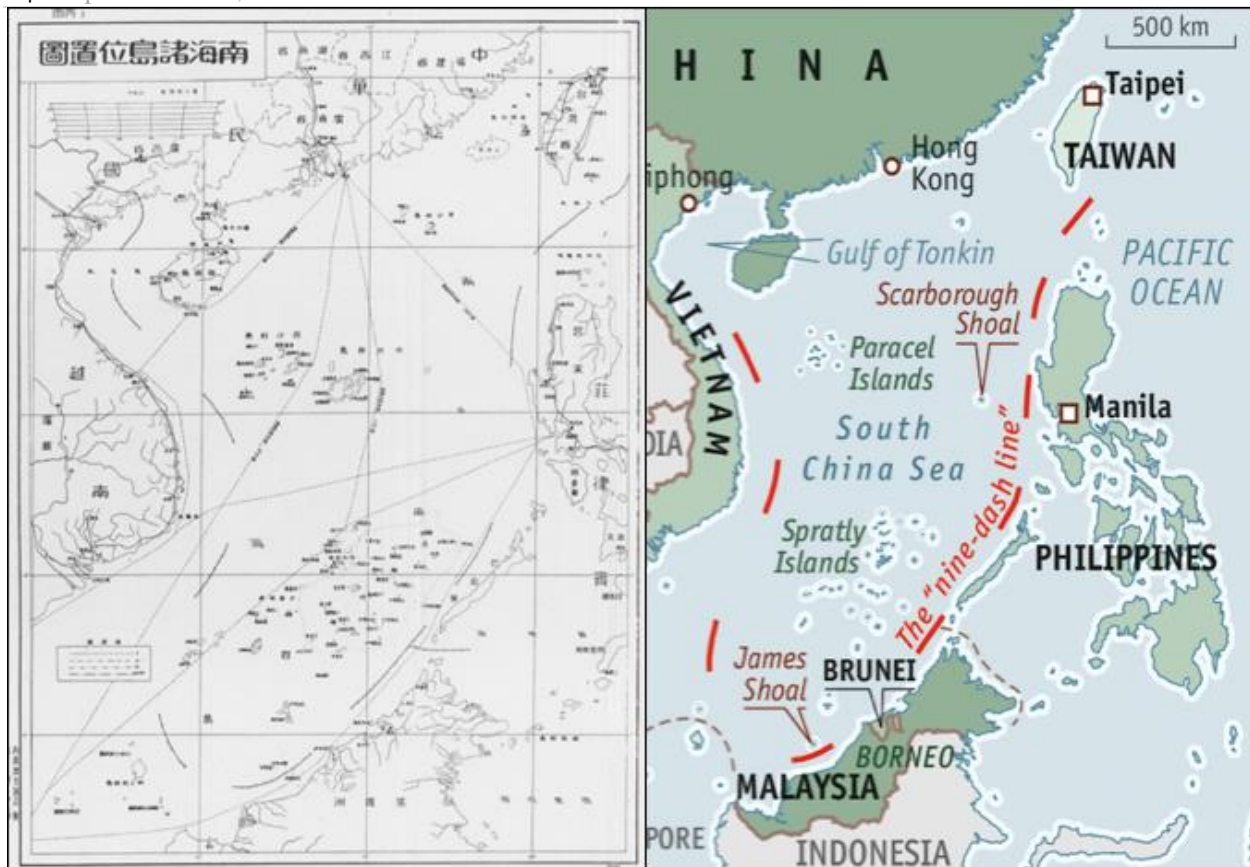


Figure 3: Original 1947 Eleven-Dash Line (left) Compared to Contemporary NDL.
 Source: Secretariat of Government of Guangdong Province, “Map of the South China Sea,”
 January 1947, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1947_Nanhai_Zhudao.png.

In 1974, regional tensions escalated into direct military conflict between the PRC and Vietnam over the Paracel Islands. In his research about the origins of the NDL, Chris P. Chung cites the PRC’s January 12, 1974 declaration, which states, “The resources of the [Paracel] islands and their adjacent seas also belong entirely to China.”¹⁸ After the PRC compelled the withdrawal of Vietnam’s forces, it reverted to its previous claims of sovereignty over the land but made no additional mention of maritime or historic rights. This position appeared consistent with the understanding of the majority of parties to the SCS disputes but still left significant confusion over the meaning of the NDL. For instance, in 1979, Hasjim Djala, Director of Legal and Treaty Affairs of the Indonesian Department of Foreign Affairs writes:

The nature of the claim of the PRC to the SCS is enigmatic...It is not clear whether the lines indicated in the Chinese maps are intended as the limits of their territorial claim towards the whole area or whether the lines simply indicate that only the islands contained within the lines are claimed by the PRC... Careful reading of the Chinese statements on this matter, especially those at the ICAO [International Civil Aviation Organization] meetings, indicates that the Chinese territorial claims are limited towards the islands and all rights related thereto, and not territorial claims over the SCS as a whole.¹⁹

To date, China, has not precisely defined the meaning of the NDL. Although China and seventeen other coastal nations officially registered objections under the UNCLOS agreement to military and foreign surveillance activities in their EEZs, China now claims to have territorial sea enforcement rights throughout the entire SCS.²⁰

The 1982 UNCLOS agreement came into full force in 1996 and was a watershed moment for the international community. For the first time, customary norms were codified into international legal standards, where specific meanings and restrictions were applied to terms such as baseline, low water line, territorial sea and airspace, exclusive economic zone, and high seas freedoms. For example, UNCLOS Section 2 makes clear that:

Every State has the right to establish the breadth of its territorial sea up to a limit not exceeding twelve nautical miles, measured from baselines determined in accordance with this Convention. The outer limit of the territorial sea is the line every point of which is at a distance from the nearest point of the baseline equal to the breadth of the territorial sea. Except where otherwise provided in this Convention, the normal baseline for measuring the breadth of the territorial sea is the low-water line along the coast as marked on large-scale charts officially recognized by the coastal State.²¹

UNCLOS leaves almost no legal gray space in its definition, and although China has never explicitly stated that it claims the NDL as territorial waters, its behavior has certainly implied a message that stands in stark contrast to both the letter and spirit of the agreement.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the PRC began shifting its message to include historic rights, possibly due, in part, to the coordination between American oil exploration engineer,

Randall C. Thompson, and a US State Department official, Daniel J. Dzurek.²² By offering a potentially advantageous legal interpretation, Thompson and Dzurek may have assisted the Chinese government in obtaining an offshore drilling lease near the Spratly Islands, which the Socialist Republic of Vietnam also claimed. In the context of the lease, Dzurek explained that “the U-shaped line might best be translated as a traditional sea boundary line.”²³ He also encouraged the idea that China had “historic rights”²⁴ that extended beyond anything discussed in UNCLOS. These interpretations, which had no basis in international law, later began to appear in more expansive PRC claims during the mid-1990s.

Finally, with a firm understanding of historical fact, US strategy can begin addressing the problem of China’s ever-expanding claims. In the last decade, China began to assert that it had territorial sovereignty over the water of the SCS, exclusive rights to the resources, and sovereignty over its islands. However, over the course of more than seventy years, China has never defined the coordinates of the NDL or its meaning. Therefore, the international community is left with interpretations based on Chinese actions. In a 2016 ruling in the case of the Philippines versus the PRC, the PCA unanimously ruled against China’s exclusive maritime rights and concluded:

To the extent China had historic rights to resources in the waters of the SCS, such rights were extinguished to the extent they were incompatible with the exclusive economic zones provided for in the Convention [UNCLOS]. The Tribunal noted that, although Chinese navigators and fishermen, as well as those of other States, had historically made use of the islands in the SCS, there was no evidence that China had historically exercised exclusive control over the water or their resources. The Tribunal concluded that there was no legal basis for China to claim historic rights to resources within the sea areas falling within the ‘nine-dash line.’²⁵

This ruling was decisive in its admonishment of China’s claims, but the Hague has no enforcement mechanism to compel a change in behavior. Making matters worse, current

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has shown no willingness to press the issue forcibly on the international stage. Especially on the economic front, he has driven the Philippines closer to the PRC and Russia. As reported by the Associated Press during the 2016 East Asian Summit (EAS), “Duterte told Russian Prime Minister Dimitri Medvedev that he was about to ‘cross the Rubicon’ with the US,”²⁶ playing right into China’s strategy of attacking the US’ credibility to defend its traditional allies in the Pacific. In response, the US must make a concerted effort to improve its relationship with the Philippines as an important enabler of US strategic influence in the Pacific. Although Duterte has made those efforts more challenging, the US must capitalize on its traditionally positive relationship with the Philippines and invest significant effort to lay the groundwork for future opportunities when the political situation becomes more favorable.

To date, Vietnam is the only country in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to endorse the ruling, and the European Union (EU) has not officially backed it as binding.²⁷ As Christopher Yung and Wang Dong note, “The US view is that China selectively ignores international law when it refuses to follow several legal precedents set by a range of other countries resolving their maritime territorial disputes through the courts.”²⁸ Richard Burns takes this a step further, arguing that as a consequence of the court’s inability to enforce compliance, the PRC is likely to “double-down”²⁹ on its island reclamation activities, militarization, and disregard for the customary law of the sea unless credible actions persuade it to change course. American naval forces are at the tip-of-the-spear in this effort and must accept the challenge of enforcing UNCLOS. Otherwise, military conflict will grow more probable each day as interactions between competing claimants become more frequent in increasingly politicized sea lanes.

Interpreting how the SCS situation has unfolded over the last seventy years, Robert D. Blackwell and Ashley J. Tellis argue that strategy and policy formulations from the CCP appear to have three underlying themes. First, China widely views the twentieth century as its “century of national humiliation.”³⁰ Second, the PRC believes that consolidating power is the only sure way to return China to its former status. Lastly, China must become a world power in order to achieve the “total rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.”³¹ Based on these three primers, the PRC has four principle strategic objectives: (1) maintain internal order and stability, (2) sustain high economic growth, (3) pacify threats inside the first island chain (which extends from Japan through the Philippines south to Borneo), and (4) enhance China’s role as a central actor in the international system.³²

China’s chief concern throughout its modern history has been maintaining order in its massive country. According to a 2001 analysis by the RAND Corporation, “The combination of geographic vulnerability to attacks from the periphery, state-society volatility, and a deeply rooted great power mentality have produced two sets of security perceptions among most Chinese: On the one hand, an intense fear of social chaos and political fragmentation or collapse... On the other hand, a belief that such chaos can be avoided only through the establishment and maintenance of a strong, united, and just government.”³³ It further surmises that China is not confident that its institutions will serve as effective checks and balances to social change. As a result, China tends to consolidate power in individual leaders rather than bureaucratic processes. Blackwell and Tellis refer to this phenomenon as the “parabellum paradigm.” They write, “Superior power alone creates order. China’s success as a state requires its leaders to possess greater capabilities than any other entity inside or outside its borders.”³⁴

While there may admittedly be other cultural elements that shape the context of Chinese policy, it is difficult to reject the premise that power and order significantly influence it; China's leaders do not believe that they can achieve great power status without absolute order and control in the domestic sphere.

On the economic front, China believes that the vast energy resource of the SCS are essential to its future economic prosperity and subsequent return to great power status. China's ability to rapidly grow its economy is arguably the most important condition for achieving these objectives.³⁵ Robert Kaplan makes the case that the SCS shipping lanes and their estimated seven billion barrels of oil and natural gas, shown in figure 4, represent China's future resource base and source of funding for military modernization.³⁶ The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) reported that in 2016, 39.5% of all China's trade, valued at nearly \$1.5 trillion, passed through the SCS compared to only 5.7% of US trade; China's trade volume represents nearly 15 percent of world GDP. Consequently, China may perceive competing claims in the SCS as direct threats to its energy security. In 2015, Chinese oil imports hit 328 million tons, or 60.6% of its total consumption. Most of the shipping passes close to the Spratly Islands.³⁷ China's economic prosperity is tied to its ability to extract those resources and control the sea lanes, just like many of its regional neighbors. Vietnam currently holds the majority of land features—twenty-seven—in the Spratly Islands, and China considers the status quo to be a threat to its own prosperity.³⁸ Although a negotiated deal between competing claimants that maintains stability and openness would be preferable, the imbalance of relative strength across the spectrum of power between China and its neighbors makes a deal less likely. Since the PRC currently controls the Paracel Islands and Scarborough Shoal, if it can solidify exclusive control

of the Spratly Islands, then it will functionally control access to the SCS and dominate the majority of southeast Asia's energy markets.

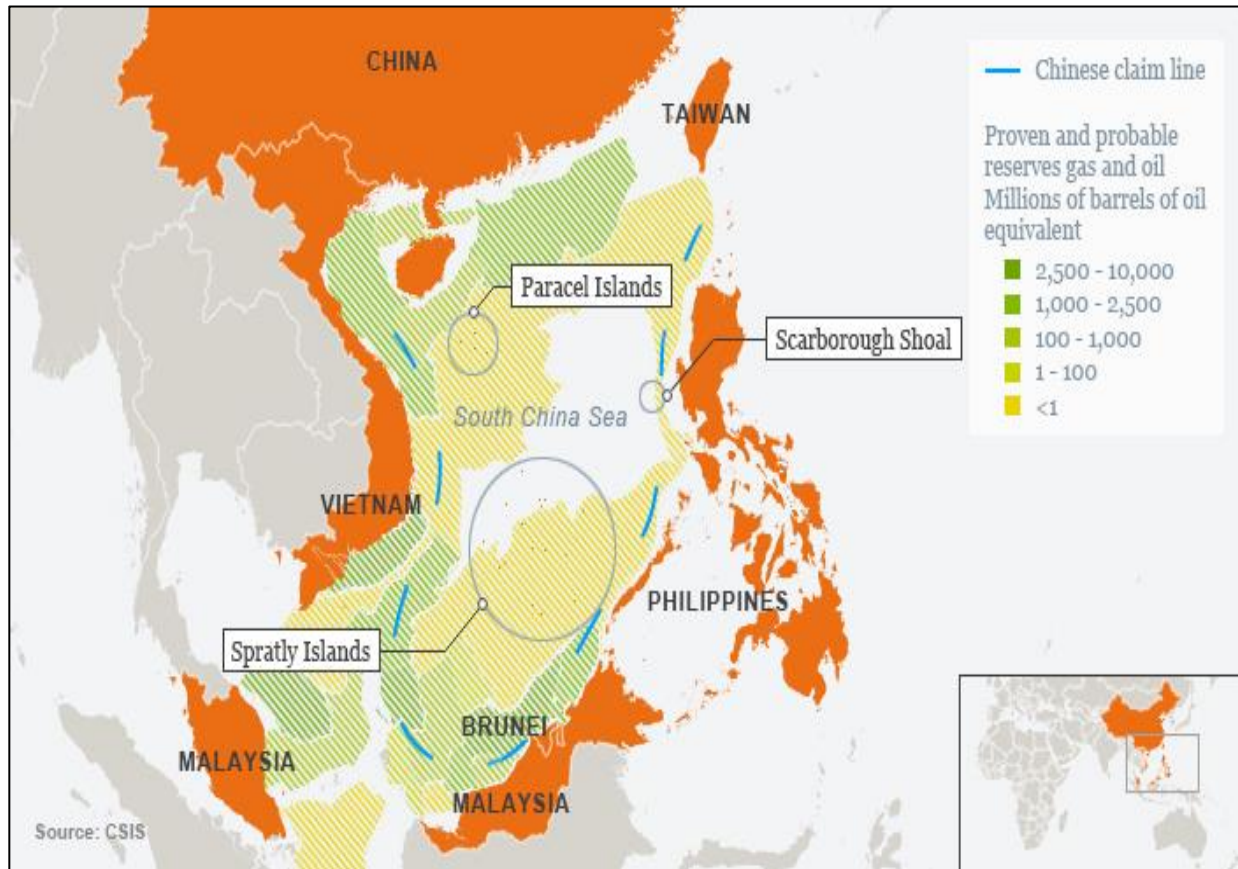


Figure 4: Energy Resources in the SCS.

Source: CSIS, "How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea?" accessed October 2, 2018, <https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/>.

Closely tied to its need for internal security and economic expansion, the PRC believes that it must curtail external threats to the first island chain. This is largely part of China's Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) military strategy to secure its southeastern borders, reinforce territorial and exclusive economic claims, and limit US influence in the western Pacific. As a result, China would become the top power of Asia. Chinese military interactions have increased steadily with the US Navy (USN) in recent years, and tensions do not appear to be easing. As part of its known island reclamation activities, in 2016, the PRC completed construction of a

10,000-foot airfield on Fiery Cross Reef in the Spratly Islands, which is now more than eleven times its natural size (see figure 5).³⁹ These reclamation projects, dubbed the “great wall of sand,”⁴⁰ serve the military purposes of expanding China’s strategic space, dominating the maritime domain within the first island chain, and pushing its reach all the way to the second island chain, which encompasses the American territory of Guam. If the US does not accept the risks of challenging the A2/AD umbrella now, it will effectively be ceding its status in the Pacific to China.

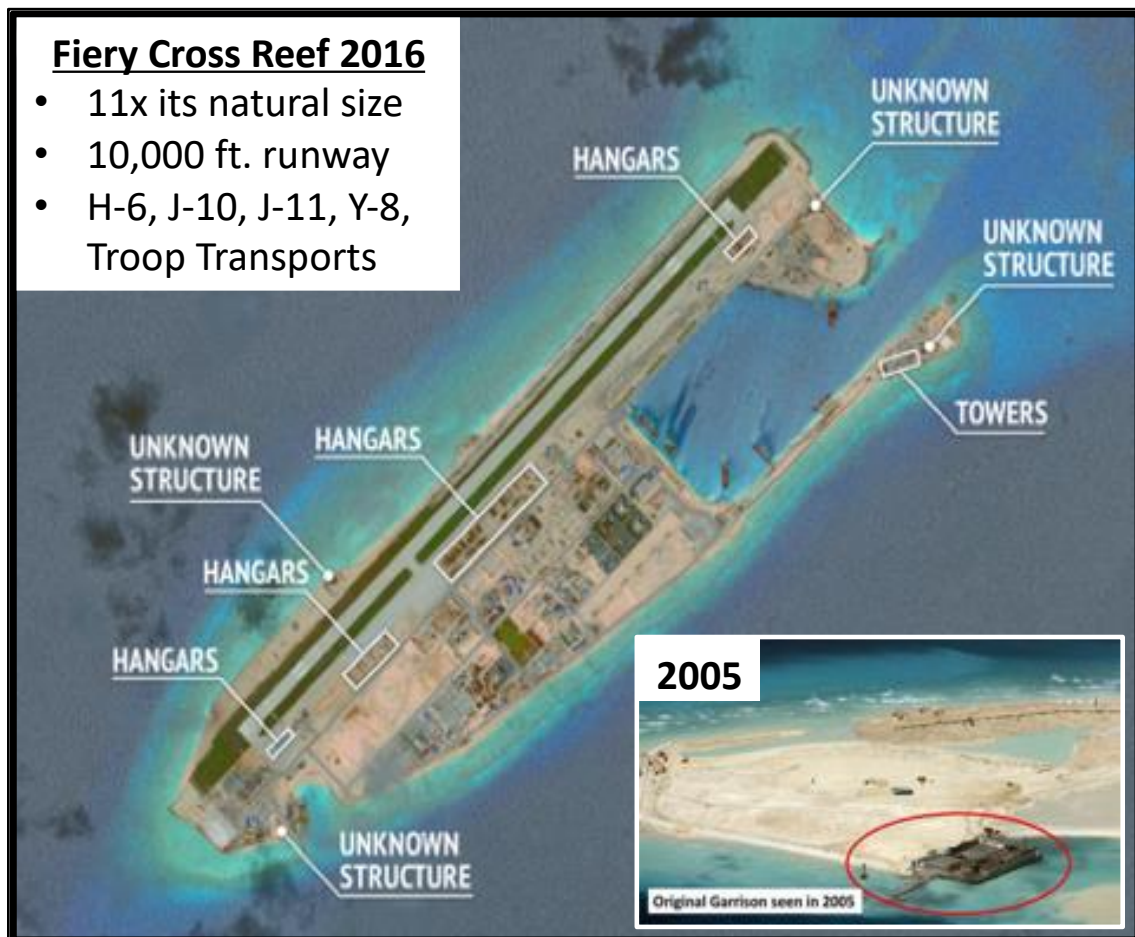


Figure 5: Fiery Cross Reef in the Spratly Islands.

Source: CSIS, “Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative,” August 1, 2016, <https://amti.csis.org/build-it-and-they-will-come/>.

The fourth and final component of China's strategy is to force a fundamental shift in the international order, establishing the PRC as a preeminent actor on the world stage and the superpower in the western Pacific. At the sixteenth Communist Party Congress (CPC) in 2014, China unveiled the *One Belt, One Road* initiative, which promises to build a new "21st Century Maritime Silk Road"⁴¹ through Europe, Central Asia, the Mediterranean Sea, the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea, and Africa. Michael Swaine assesses that the initiative is an attempt to "leverage China's growing economic power and influence in order to strengthen and expand cooperative interactions, create an integrated web of mutually beneficial economic, social, and political ties, and ultimately lower distrust and enhance sense of common security."⁴² Evan Feigenbaum describes the *One Belt, One Road* initiative as an example of "active leverage"⁴³ that promises shared prosperity but accomplishes it through political and economic coercion that gives China the ability to shape markets, control foreign investments, and secure advantageous leases on overseas ports from Djibouti to Australia. *One Belt, One Road* appears to be a trojan horse moving towards greater control over the international system.

In support of its expanding role, China has simultaneously enhanced its military reach. In 2017, President Xi asserted, "By midcentury, China's military will be first class in every way...A military is built to fight. Our military must regard combat capability as the criterion to meet in all its work and focus on how to win when it is called on... We will never allow anyone, any organization, or any political party, at any time or in any form, to separate any part of Chinese territory from China."⁴⁴ During his speech, President Xi also indicated that China would go to any lengths necessary to prevent provinces such as Hong Kong, Tibet, and Taiwan from achieving any form of independence. The totality of his statements foreshadow a more aggressive foreign policy and allude to China's vision of itself as a dominant power.

The CCP increasingly views its strategic objectives as existential mandates. Graham Allison makes the striking link that “when [President] Xi Jinping has nightmares, the apparition he sees is Mikhail Gorbachev.”⁴⁵ In a culture and system that often speaks in terms of symbolism and stories, Xi’s own words indicate that he views the collapse of the Soviet empire as an allegory with stark lessons for China. In a 2012 speech, Xi alluded to three fatal errors that led to the downfall of the Soviet Union. First, the Soviets relaxed political control of society, leading to a breakdown in the Communist system. Then, they allowed the Communist Party to become corrupt and hollow. Finally, the Soviets nationalized their military, requiring allegiance to the nation rather than to the party.⁴⁶ Xi’s conception of the communist struggles of the past combined with his vision for China’s preeminent future project a future path from which he is unlikely to stray without significant pressure.

Motivation

China’s strategic objectives illuminate two competing views of its motivations. The first view is that China seeks to project power on a more expansionist scale beyond the Indian Ocean. This opinion sees the PRC’s coercive behavior across the military, political, and economic spheres as evidence of an offensive strategic outlook. In contrast, the alternative view sees the desire for complete control of the SCS as defensive in nature based on China’s traditional culture and fear of repeating the communist failures of the twentieth century. Although the latter explanation provides more historical examples from which to infer intent, making the case proves difficult due to differing perspectives over the meaning of *defensive*.

Andrew Scobell describes the confusion over offensive versus defensive intent as the “Chinese Cult of Defense” and concludes, “This conviction will continue to move these

[Chinese] leaders to rationalize virtually any military operation as a defensive action.”⁴⁷ A 2019 report by the US Defense Intelligence Agency further supports this assertion, explaining that China describes its military strategy as “active defense”⁴⁸—defensive at the strategic level but offensive at the operational and tactical levels. Beijing seems unwilling to acknowledge that this strategy can easily be construed as threatening to other nations, and China’s actions are sending an unambiguous signal to its regional neighbors and strategic competitors that there is a strong cause for concern.

China’s fears, real or imagined, provide solid context for understanding the Chinese view of defense. In the *Realpolitik*⁴⁹ (balance of power) tradition of international relations theory, Donald K. Emmerson describes the PRC’s “three fears—fear of re-humiliation, fear of containment, and fear of disaffection.”⁵⁰ China’s fear of re-humiliation is based, in large part, on the PRC’s continued need to inspire a heightened sense of nationalism since the end of World War II. The second fear—containment—comes from China’s desire to expand its economy in order to become a modern superpower by the centennial of the communist revolution in 2049.⁵¹ The PRC views its ability to control the resources of the SCS as well as its ability to reach new western markets as the strongest motivators against being contained by external influencers.⁵² Lastly, the third fear—disaffection—is fundamentally focused on maintaining absolute order and control over domestic affairs. The most recent manifestation of dealing with this fear is China’s new “social credit laboratory.”⁵³ According to the PRC’s State Council, “the [social credit] system should allow the trustworthy to roam everywhere under heaven while making it hard for the discredited to take a single step.”⁵⁴ Fundamentally, President Xi’s interpretation of the collapse of the Soviet system combined with the CCP’s fear of a similar fate highlight China’s

desperation for internal control as a principle policy driver. As a result of its most significant fears, the PRC has a multifaceted, complicated, and broad interpretation of strategic defense.

Ultimately, this complex interpretation is the prime source of confusion in the SCS. As evidenced by the 2010 *Ocean Development Report*, China considers the SCS to be part of its “blue soil,”—sovereign historic maritime territory.⁵⁵ Consequently, from the perspective of other nations who share an interest in the SCS, China’s cultural views of defense combined with its fears have translated into a toxic policy of domination. Some might argue that the PRC’s strategies show offensive intent, but China sees them as protecting what it interprets to be rightfully and historically its own. As a result, the US finds itself as the only superpower who has the capability to help China reshape its vision before tensions become untenable.

*Each one hopes that if he feeds the crocodile enough,
the crocodile will eat him last. All of them hope that
the storm will pass before their turn comes to be devoured.*

~ Winston S. Churchill, January 20, 1940

CHAPTER 3 AMERICA'S STRATEGIC CHOICES

State of Strategy

Reading between the lines, it is hard to miss the subtle message to China in the *NSS*: there will be a price to pay for non-compliance with international norms. Across all diplomatic, intelligence, military, and economic levers of national power (DIME), the four pillars of the *NSS*— (1) protecting the American people, the homeland, and American way of life; (2) promoting American prosperity; (3) preserving peace through strength; and (4) advancing American influence—lay the competitive framework for a clear cost imposition strategy. They also provide coherent messaging aimed at shaping expectations and engaging the bureaucratic machinery of government and the defense enterprise.⁵⁶

In order to be credible, any strategy must achieve five key measures of effectiveness (MOEs): provoke a desirable change or reaction, act in accordance with international law, solidify support of allies and partners, amplify influence across all levers of power, and accept the risk of a response while also providing manageable de-escalation measures. As the focus of this research is on military options, these MOEs will serve as the lenses through which military actions will be evaluated for their potential impact on China's strategic calculus.

Making Cost Imposition Work: Lessons from the Past and Present

Although there are important differences between past and contemporary competitions, there are also lessons that provide a firm foundation for analysis. The US has a historical model to judge the effectiveness of its cost imposition strategy—the Soviet Union (USSR). In 2014, Colonel Kenneth P. Eckman wrote a detailed policy paper that used both a qualitative and quantitative analysis to outline an effective cost imposition strategy against China. Eckman writes, “The inherent offensive or defensive nature of a rival’s response can work to a competitor’s advantage...As a competitive strategy, a competitor can make offensively oriented choices eliciting defensive program, posture, or operating concept reactions from an opponent...By committing to and investing in a particular response, a competitor bears the opportunity costs inherent to foregone choices.”⁵⁷ Eckman’s objective was to place the burden of expansionist policies in Asia squarely on the shoulders of China’s developing economy, which is, in part, how the US pressured the USSR.

The key differences are that China’s economy is larger, more stable, and more closely tied to the US and world economies than the Soviet economy of the 1980s; the ultimate goals of China are vastly different than those of the USSR. Additionally, the Cold War was principally about which ideology would dominate the world order—capitalism versus communism and individual freedom against the supremacy of the state.⁵⁸ In contrast, the great power competition between the US and China is less about existential beliefs and more about economic growth, influence, and competitive advantage in an increasingly interconnected and globalized world. Unlike the Soviet era, this competition is not a zero-sum game but rather a maneuver for influence over the system. In reality, both superpowers can prosper under the current liberal

order, but China wants more influence on the global system. Thus, US military actions in support of DIME efforts must impose costs on China, especially in the maritime domain.

Present economic policy towards China is indicative that cost imposition can produce desirable outcomes. A July 2018 CSIS report details five key parameters necessary for countering “gray zone coercion,” the area between competition and conflict that exists between the US and China: “transparency;” “preparation and preemption;” “integrated action;” “early, bold action;” “[and] clear, specific, and consistent messaging.”⁵⁹ As a fitting result of the Trump Administration’s economic pressure via tariffs to correct China’s unfair trade practices, US-China bilateral negotiations during the 2018 G20 Summit produced a temporary halt to the current trade war.⁶⁰ The administration’s actions followed the path outlined by CSIS, and Chinese state media described the negotiations as “constructive and very positive.”⁶¹ So far, the Trump Administration’s cost imposition gamble has produced positive results; there is no reason to believe a similar approach to military policies could not have a complimentary effect.

Coupled with the pressure of rapidly expanding technology, persistent presence, and expansion of relationships with regional allies and partners, naval power in the Pacific has the ability to increase costs on the expensive systems that comprise the bulk of China’s A2/AD capacity. As the US military competes in the Pacific, it also may force the PRC to absorb more economic pain for its behavior. As a result, cost imposition has the potential to sow the seeds of internal dissatisfaction and instability within China, which could thereby trigger significant burdens on the CCP and challenge its government mechanisms for control.⁶²

Despite the historical effectiveness that this approach has shown, future implementation will require more deliberate attention. Thomas Mahnken wrote a detailed analysis about the factors that may contribute to the overall effectiveness of cost imposition on a competitor such as China.

In general, peacetime strategies focus on a combination of economic, military, and political tools imposed over a long period of time, in some cases decades—much slower than during wartime.⁶³

While Mahnken takes a comprehensive look at the many complexities of cost imposition, he makes a particularly compelling case for the importance of *initiative*. He writes, “The side that is implementing a successful strategy should possess the initiative in the competition, controlling its pace and scope while forcing its competitor to react.”⁶⁴ In the context of the US-China relationship, the implication of Mahnken’s argument seems clear: the US has been on the wrong side of the initiative gap with China for quite some time.

If current capabilities represent the first-order calculation to relative military advantage, then the pace of research, acquisition, and tactical development may be the second order predictor of future advantage. Although US military capabilities presently exceed those of China, the US is reacting to China’s A2/AD strategy rather than driving it. Harkening back to the Cold War, Eckman’s analysis provides the insight that the acquisition and rapid development of strategic bombers between 1960 and 1985 forced the USSR to develop tens of thousands of air defense artillery systems and spend billions of dollars on surface-to-air missile systems that became significantly less effective once the US introduced *stealth* technology coupled with precision-guided munitions as part of America’s “second offset strategy.”⁶⁵ When combined with the “first offset strategy”⁶⁶ of nuclear deterrence, American industrial output, research, and development exceeded the capability of the Soviets to match and made the costs prohibitive for them to compete.

The *NSS* gives a just nod to the reality that China has turned the tables on cost imposition due to, among many reasons, the extensive time periods and massive costs involved in

development of new military capabilities such as the F-35 Lightning II, which has been in development for more than twenty years from concept to initial operational capability (IOC). One of the themes throughout the *NSS* is that the US must modernize and streamline the acquisition process to deliver more capability with less cost overruns at a pace that exceeds the development rate of the evolving threat.⁶⁷ Over the same twenty-year period, China developed advanced weapons systems and modernized its force structure to take advantage of newer technologies in cyber and space warfare as well as low frequency radar systems designed to track low-observable platforms and weapons, which has challenged the force multiplier that stealth was supposed to provide.⁶⁸ More than any other underlying cause, the inefficiency inherent in the acquisition process is a significant hindrance to the US seizing the initiative.

While modernization will hopefully accelerate over the next two decades, the US cannot wait for its bureaucratic processes to improve before taking actions to retake the lead. Quite to the contrary, the US must use its current capability and capacity advantages to produce a desirable response from China. Modernization will take time, but China certainly will not wait. The military actions described in the following chapter are designed to provide additional leverage to US decision-makers in the competition for the SCS.

*The secret of steel has always carried with it a mystery.
You must learn its riddle. You must learn its discipline.
For no one in this world can you trust. Not men, not women, not beasts.
This [steel sword], you can trust.*

~ Father of Conan the Barbarian

CHAPTER 4

SENDING THE MESSAGE: NAVAL OPTIONS IN THE SCS

Sea Control of Key Maritime Terrain

In a future SCS conflict, naval forces will have the lead in demonstrating firm sea control of key maritime terrain, especially the Malacca, Sunda, and Lombok Straits (see figure 6). In order to credibly communicate its ability to control access, the US Pacific Fleet (PACFLT) should conduct a fleet-level exercise near these chokepoints that culminates in sailing three separate task forces simultaneously through each of the three straits. In essence, the message to China is simple: the US has the capability to contain China's maritime ambitions, if it should become necessary.

This type of naval activity is fully supportable by PACFLT as observed in recent naval operations over the last twelve years. Since 2006, the US Seventh Fleet—subordinate to PACFLT and headquartered in Yokosuka, Japan—has sponsored Exercise *Valiant Shield*, a biennial exercise conducted in the Marianas Islands training ranges. The USN conducts *Valiant Shield* as a US-only follow-on to the *Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC)* multinational exercise.⁶⁹ Typically, these operations involve up to three carrier and expeditionary strike groups—CSGs and ESGs, respectively—executing a Pacific contingency campaign over a one-month period.

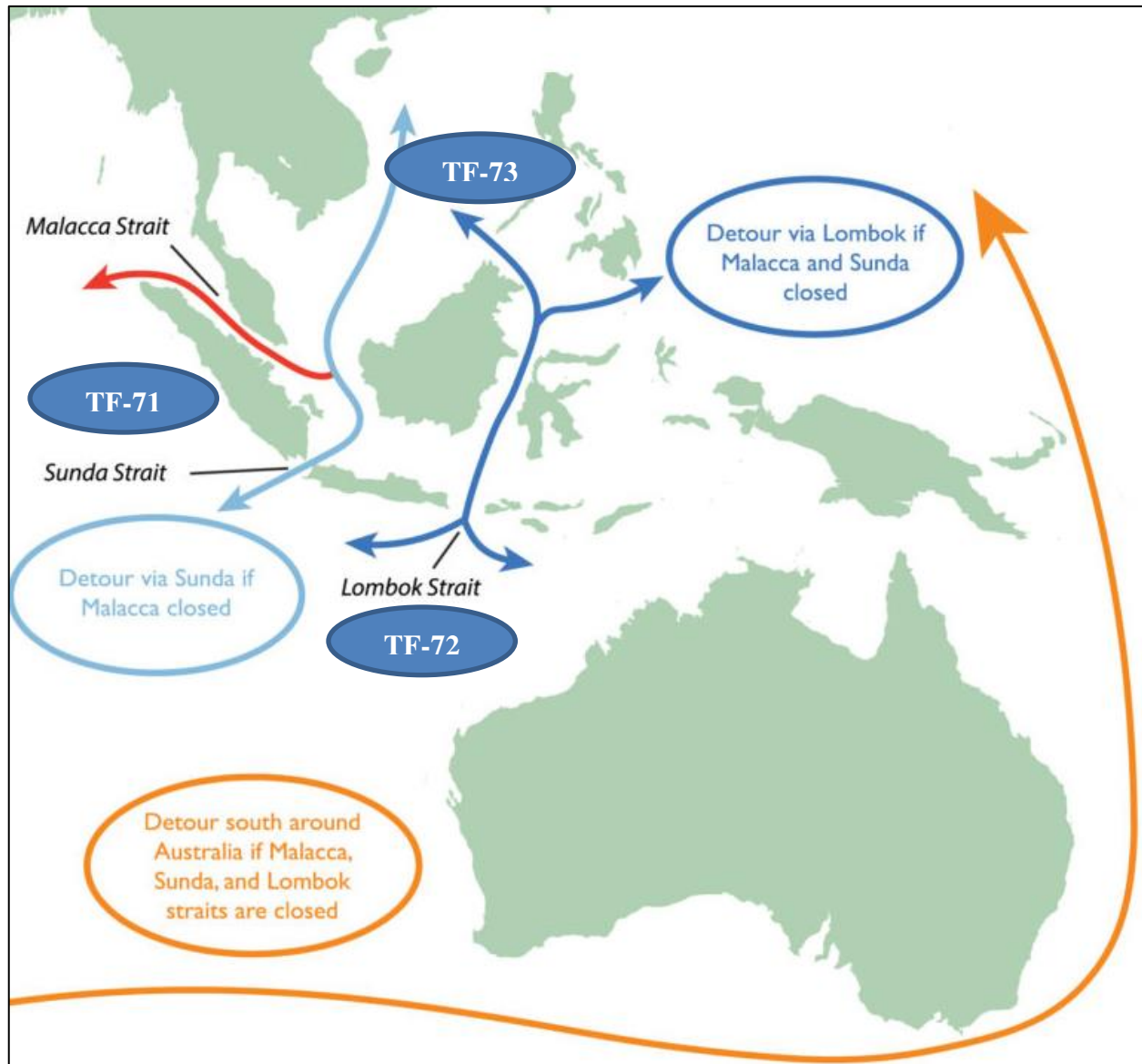


Figure 6: Key Maritime Terrain of the SCS.

Source: CSIS, “How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea?” accessed October 2, 2018, <https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/>.

Accordingly, the USN should plan an operation on the same scale of *Valiant Shield* but in the vicinity of the key maritime terrain of the SCS. In order to achieve the desired response, the exercise should take place in three distinct phases: Phase 1—integrated sea, air, and undersea operations southwest of the Lombok Strait, west of the Sunda Strait, and near the Spratly Islands;

Phase 2—simultaneous but separate passage of three strike groups through the Malacca Straits, Lombok Straits, and SCS; and Phase 3—coordinated operations with all-three task forces throughout the SCS.

The effectiveness of the ‘three-task force’ plan shows strong performance across the MOEs, described in Chapter 3. First, it limits China’s realistic response to the political and information arenas rather than the direct military sphere due to the PLAN’s insufficient blue water capability and lack of a coherent fleet-level operating concept according to retired Vice Admiral Yoji Koda of the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Forces.⁷⁰ However, he also acknowledges that China’s current blue water capabilities are evolving at a rapid pace and are not expected to be nearly as limited by 2030. Yoji makes a strong case that the most effective way to contain the PLAN is to control key maritime chokepoints, which is the exact intent of the ‘three-task force’ plan.⁷¹

Based on the PRC’s historical reactions, there is strength in numbers for US warships, and American naval power must capitalize on its relative advantage. Today, the PRC does not have the ability to react with an equivalent military response. For example, the PLAN has only one operational aircraft carrier, the *Liaoning*, which has limited power projection capability and a minimally developed concept of operations (CONOPS). Based on recent military interactions with deployed US forces, the PRC has two practical military responses: (1) increasing combat patrols throughout the SCS with additional overflights of US warships using the H-6 strategic bomber, or (2) challenging US vessels with diesel attack submarines and/or surface combatants.



Figure 7: Chinese H-6 Bomber Flies Patrol in SCS (2016).

Source: Xinhua News Agency via the Associated Press (AP), <https://www.news.com.au/technology/us-reacts-to-chinese-bombers-practicing-bombing-runs-on-guam/news-story/da55b4bc29f64f5706e64ef1862573f1>.

The likely military reaction is increased patrols by Chinese aircraft in the SCS, including possible overflights of US task forces. This has become a common occurrence and is consistent with international law. As reported by *Reuters*, the PRC flew an H-6 bomber along the path of the NDL and into the recently finished Fiery Cross Reef airfield in the Spratly Islands for the first time.⁷² Following an earlier combat air patrol in July that originated from Woody Island (see figure 7), a spokesman for the People’s Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) announced to Chinese state media, “Based on the need of the Air Force for fulfilling its missions and tasks, combat readiness patrols to the South China Sea by Air Force servicemen will continue on a

regular basis.”⁷³ The biggest implications of these flights do not come from the tactical risk to naval vessels, but rather from the strategic reality that the H-6 is now operating from the Spratlys, which drastically extends its combat reach and indicates China’s progress towards solidifying more control of the SCS. US fighter aircraft have repeatedly executed professional intercept-and-escort procedures with no escalation, and although these overflights represent relatively low-risk encounters, they send a much larger strategic message.

On the other hand, a more dangerous response could come from Kilo-class submarines and capital surface warships such as the *Luyang III*, a Chinese copy of the US *Arleigh Burke* class guided missile destroyer. Surveillance is the key component of China’s A2/AD construct, a CONOPS that is still more of a political talking point rather than a fully developed capability.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, the problem with surface and subsurface threats in a peacetime scenario is the potential disruption to task force maneuvers in confined waters coupled with the increased risk of a collision at sea. One glaring incident recently occurred in 2015 when a fast-attack submarine surfaced in the vicinity of the USS *Ronald Reagan* CSG off the coast of Japan.⁷⁵ Although this type of threat usually goes unacknowledged, this instance was a notable exception to the rule. In an unusual maneuver, the submarine revealed itself only after tracking the strike group for at least half a day, as reported by the Pentagon.⁷⁶ While the USN has the tactics, techniques, and procedures to reasonably manage the submarine threat, this incident was a public affairs and political victory for China rather than any type of military success. In anticipation of similar reactions, the USG must be prepared to counter the PRC narrative to any future interactions.



Figure 8: USNS *Impeccable* Incident (2009).

Source: US Navy Photo/Released. “A crewmember on a Chinese trawler uses a grapple hook in an apparent attempt to snag the towed acoustic array of the military Sealift Command ocean surveillance ship, USNS *Impeccable* (T-AGOS-23),” https://www.navy.mil/view_image.asp?id=69479.

In the most egregious example of harassment, the incident between the PLAN and the intelligence collection vessel, USNS *Impeccable*, marks the extreme limits of the competitive space. In March 2009, the PRC violated all acceptable standards of professional maritime conduct by deliberately impeding safe navigation in the international waters—seventy-five miles from Hainan Island.⁷⁷ Five Chinese vessels intentionally placed obstacles and other hazards in *Impeccable*'s path, forcing it to take extreme measures to avoid a collision; a Chinese-flag trawler also attempted to cut its towed sonar array cable (figure 8).⁷⁸ Although *Impeccable* fortuitously survived the incident with no permanent damage or loss of life, it demonstrated the PRC's increasing aggression towards US naval and intelligence activities, particularly when it can isolate an individual ship. On the international stage, the incident highlighted China's blatant

disregard for UNCLOS. China has repeatedly attempted to prohibit foreign military or intelligence activity in the SCS without prior permission. However, the majority of UNCLOS signatories refuse to acknowledge China's unreasonable demands, and accordingly, the USG must continue to vigorously challenge China's position in order to set the correct legal precedent. Despite the PLAN's actions against *Impeccable*, the PRC cannot credibly commit such a violation against a fleet of warships.

Despite possible Chinese reactions, the 'three-task force' operation will reassure allies and partners that the US has the ability to deter and counter regional aggression in a crisis situation. Concurrently, it will prod China's deepest fears of containment and denial of freedom of action in the maritime domain. According to Yung, "The US could choke off the economic growth of China by using its navy to block and strangulate China's access to petroleum and raw materials—the so-called 'Malacca Dilemma.'"⁷⁹ The operation shows a strong determination to exercise maritime rights in international waters and airspace in support of UNCLOS, which should be of the utmost importance to all maritime nations.

In the event of a military interaction with one or more of the task forces, however limited, China will look to shift the blame away from its aggressive behavior and onto the US. With a desire to undermine US credibility, China will attempt to capitalize on an unrelated string of high-profile USN mishaps in recent years. As reported in the *Navy Times*, the Navy relieved the Commander of the US Seventh Fleet in August 2017 following two separate collisions over a two-month period that resulted in the deaths of seventeen American service members.⁸⁰ In June, the guided-missile destroyer, USS *Fitzgerald*, collided with a merchant vessel off the coast of Japan. Two months later, the destroyer, USS *John S. McCain*, collided with a civilian tanker ship

near Singapore. Although there may be little similarity between these past mishaps and any future interactions between USN and PLAN combatant vessels in the SCS, US forces must be prepared to counter PRC propaganda with video and audio evidence, which is already part of its routine procedures. Otherwise, the PRC may shape a politically advantageous narrative in the international community.

Lastly, because this operation is a short-term event, it provides de-escalation dynamics in two respects—duration and intensity. While the operation sends an unambiguous message, it is also similar in scale and scope to other naval exercises conducted farther east in the Pacific. The location may be provocative, but the actions are consistent with routine maritime operations in international waters. The relatively short duration—less than thirty days—will provide the opportunity to reset the US-PRC relationship and assess options for future negotiations. Along similar lines, the operation is sufficient in size to intimidate the PLAN from attempting overt military action against the US fleet. In its present condition, the PLAN simply cannot match the size, combat power, or defense-in-depth capabilities of a large naval presence. Therefore, based on the MOE analysis, US naval forces should conduct large-scale operations on a regular basis near the SCS and its key chokepoints until the PRC comprehends the message and adjusts its current course.

Combined Expeditionary Warfare Training

In conjunction with controlling key maritime terrain, any potential SCS contingency operation will require expansive expeditionary power with allies and partners. If international pressure cannot convince the PRC to stop its militarization in the Spratly Islands, then

eventually, force may be required to dislodge Chinese positions. Expanded defense cooperation with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam may be the key to this line of effort.

An important partner for maintaining stability and legitimacy in the SCS, Vietnam knows that in order to sustain its regional economic interests, it must carefully balance a tumultuous relationship with China against a burgeoning one with the US. Warming to the benefits of closer relations, Vietnam has participated in several bilateral meetings with US officials since 2012. These discussions have borne fruit in finding common ground on the important issues of open access, freedom of navigation, unimpeded commerce, full implementation of a SCS code of conduct, and compliance with UNCLOS.⁸¹ Although there are many facets of security cooperation, a significant aspect of any negotiations should include combined training opportunities with the US and Vietnam. In 2012, the Heritage Foundation developed several recommendations for US-Vietnam cooperation, arguing that “the US should focus on improving the value proposition of US-Vietnamese defense ties through enhanced training and education, and as much operational contact as the relationship will bear.”⁸² Based on Vietnam’s relative capabilities, combined training and doctrine development is vital to its reliability as a balance against China.

One effective medium for improving interoperability is through regularly scheduled exercises such as the *Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC)* exercise (see figure 9). The Vietnamese Defense Ministry reported that Vietnam only sent observers to *RIMPAC* in both 2012 and 2016. However, that participation has recently expanded. In 2018, eight Vietnamese People’s Navy (VPN) officers actively participated during *RIMPAC* events, which indicates some degree of evolution in Vietnamese willingness.⁸³ Now that Vietnam has shown an increased appetite for

combined operations, further opportunities exist to send larger VPN contingents to gain experience.



Figure 9: *RIMPAC 2018* in Hawaiian OPAREA.

Source: US Navy Photo/Released, <https://navaltoday.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/four-newcomers-joining-26-nation-naval-drill-rimpac-2018-off-hawaii.jpg>.

Along this line of effort, PACFLT should consider enhancing future *RIMPAC* exercises by conducting them in the SCS rather than in the Hawaiian operations area. Thinktanks and defense circles have hinted at this type of action since 2012 because it could cause a shift in China’s strategic calculus. In a Fall 2018 *National Interest* piece, Tuan Pham and Grant Newsham write, “The bold trifecta in strategic effects—pushing back against China’s unilateral expansionism in the strategic waterway [SCS], reinforcing the legal standing of the 2016 International Arbitral Tribunal ruling that invalidated Beijing’s Nine-Dash Line claims,

and underscoring the universal importance of rule of law and compliance with global norms—will demonstrate that the US and like-minded nations are willing to stand up for their national interests and shared values.”⁸⁴ In essence, multinational action on the scale of *RIMPAC* would signal a strong international desire to protect the SCS as part of the global commons, not as China’s exclusive maritime dominion.

Similar to the positive strategic impacts of decisive sea control, combined expeditionary training also performs well across most MOEs but also carries higher risks for Chinese backlash against regional allies and partners. China prefers to negotiate in bilateral rather than multilateral forums such as ASEAN because it can use overwhelming political and economic leverage as well as the threat of its rising combat power to achieve its foreign policy objectives.

To counter this proclivity, expanded training events would have to progress with a large degree of international cooperation to mitigate those risks and maintain broad support.

In gauging potential responses, some analysts may attempt to make the case that moving the US closer to Vietnam will cause the Chinese to accelerate an arms race, increase military spending, and enhance their A2/AD capabilities. While these issues are certainly concerning, a failure to counter China’s aggressive militarization of the SCS with military pressure will absolutely embolden its positions. There is no evidence to suggest that China would proceed differently if the US avoided a closer relationship with Vietnam. Rather than the threat of an arms race, a more realistic response may take the form of a military skirmish in the Spratly Islands against Vietnamese units. Disputes between China and Vietnam have occurred regularly since World War II—some notable incidents are depicted in table 2 of the Appendix. For instance, in 2014, the Vice Commander of Vietnam’s Coast Guard, backed by clear video

evidence, reported to the international press that a Chinese vessel repeatedly collided with one of its ships after it attempted to prevent the deployment of a Chinese oil rig in Vietnam's EEZ. Providing no additional justification for its actions, China's Foreign Ministry simply implied that it was conducting business as usual.⁸⁵

Despite the risk of clashes, it is equally important to note that these interactions have been a regular part of Vietnam's uneasy relationship with China over the years. Mark Manyin explains that Hanoi has followed the same path since the 1980s: market reforms, improved relations with neighbors, a deeper relationship with China, and better relations with the US.⁸⁶ Vietnam can achieve its goals by carefully 'threading the needle' between expanding its military capabilities through training with the US and growing its economic relationship with China. The US has the long-term national security aspiration of accessing Vietnam's port facilities and runways—potentially Cam Rahn Bay—to enhance its strategic influence near the SCS, but thus far, Vietnam has continued following a “three no's policy of no military bases, no alliances, and no leaning towards one country.”⁸⁷ Any future prospect along these lines will undoubtedly be a slow and long-term endeavor, and combined training opportunities represent a small but important step in the process. The US-Vietnam relationship strikes a delicate balance, and it is possible because both nations share similar interests in the openness of the SCS.

Most dangerously, the PRC could exploit concerns over America's future commitment to the Pacific and encourage other nations to bandwagon with it as a viable alternative to American leadership. As with the Philippines, the PRC also attempted to strongarm Vietnam in 2010, warning it to avoid growing its relationship with the US. James Bellacqua writes, “Rear Admiral Yang Yi [People's Liberation Army Navy] suggested that Vietnam would 'regret' its decision to hold a seven-day exercise with the US Navy and urged Vietnam to learn from the experience of

Pakistan, which he claimed felt ‘hurt’ once Washington ‘no longer had any use for it’ after the Cold War.”⁸⁸ Although Yang takes the comparison out of historical context, his statements provide solid propaganda to shape attitudes among China’s competitors. If the US and Vietnam do not advance their security relationship, Vietnam could similarly find itself moving towards the Chinese sphere of influence, which would be far more damaging to US interests than China’s expanding military capability.

While China would absolutely see any US-led exercise near the SCS as a provocation, in the long run, the international community would be sending the correct message. Combined expeditionary training is also completely defensible under UNCLOS in both EEZs and on the high seas. As a result, it should garner wide support of all nations that have an interest in preventing unilateral maritime power-grabs. In addition, conducting operations in China’s backyard could magnify the effectiveness of all other levers of DIME by forcing China into a multilateral forum that will reduce its coercive influence over other participating states.

In weighing de-escalation options, the benefit of regularly scheduled exercises is that participation and duration can vary in response to China’s reaction. Positive dialogue with China could produce rewards as well as invitations to participate in future training exercises.⁸⁹ In contrast, continued aggression and violations of international law have the potential to threaten China’s growing economy and status as a great power. De-escalation, therefore, is inherent in China’s cost-basis—great power status requires presence, recognition, and participation. Thus, China has a strategic incentive to avoid a larger conflict that could embarrass its aspiring fleet and damage the prestige that it seeks.

Ultimately, failure to demonstrate commitment will only help China drive US influence from the Pacific. The PRC successfully courted Philippines President Duterte, signaling the shift of a stalwart US ally towards China and Russia—a move that played right into China’s larger strategy of attacking US credibility with its traditional Pacific allies.⁹⁰ It is also striking evidence that the US must act decisively to reassure the region that America will be there to defend it. Failure to do so could drive long-time and future friends into the welcoming arms of China.

Contested Freedom of Navigation Operations

The third and perhaps most controversial line of effort is to accelerate *contested* FONOPS throughout the SCS, particularly over the Spratly Island chain. Prior to 2016, airborne missions specifically avoided operations within twenty-four nautical miles of the Spratly Islands because the USG declared them to be politically sensitive areas (PSAs).⁹¹ In enabling these restrictions, however, the USG was inadvertently helping to strengthen the legal standing of China’s illegitimate maritime claims under UNCLOS Article 17.⁹² According to *The American Journal of International Law*, “The conventional view is that formation of CIL [customary international law] requires two distinct elements to be established: state practice and *opinio juris*”—an opinion of law or necessity.⁹³ China is attempting to settle the matter of state practice through its island reclamation activities, air defense identification zones, and demands for prior permission to conduct military operations outside of its territorial waters. The purpose of contested FONOPS is to deny China a status of consent. Accordingly, the USG must eliminate the PSA construct and replace it with robust air operations in the skies over the Spratly Islands.

The new model of *contested* FONOPS must assume that the PRC will progressively challenge each overflight with an increasing level of hostility. In 2015, Commander of US

Pacific Command, Admiral Harry Harris, boldly asserted that “the United States will continue to fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows, and [we] support the right of all nations to do the same.”⁹⁴ In response to increased operations, China will undoubtedly attempt to call the United States’ bluff. Therefore, future missions must conduct FONOPS with two key enhancements: (1) employ strike packages of tactical jet aircraft flying through the Spratly Islands and (2) provide defensive combat air (DCA) assets for expanded Special Reconnaissance Operations (SROs) with no prior notification to the PRC.

For the USN, a sustained or surge carrier presence coupled with the evolution of naval air power capability over the past several years provides an unprecedented window of opportunity to challenge China’s maritime claims. Naval aviation must seize the initiative by executing FONOPS throughout the Spratly Islands, employing integrated strike packages led by the Navy’s most advanced asset, the EA-18G Growler—a platform specifically built to take the high-end fight to China’s doorstep. In September 2018, the Airborne Electronic Attack (AEA) community released its final environmental impact statement for a substantial expansion of its fleet. When complete in 2021, the expansion will include nine carrier-based squadrons with seven jets per squadron (an increase of two jets per squadron) and two new expeditionary squadrons with six jets per squadron (for a total of five theater-level expeditionary squadrons).⁹⁵ The AEA community, its flyers, and its Growlers are poised to lead this revolutionary air power contest.

From a maritime law standpoint, the US can no longer accept a twenty-four-mile precautionary standoff distance. Led by the Growler, the USN should conduct routine high and medium altitude flyovers of the entire Spratly Island chain with a complete defense-in-depth strike package of up to eighteen aircraft. This is well within the organic capacity of the carrier air

wing, which can normally support up to twenty-four aircraft transitions (The Navy defines transition number as the total number of launches and recoveries in a given carrier deck cycle). When supported by additional expeditionary assets, these packages will send two unambiguous messages to Chinese forces in the Spratly Islands as well as the centralized PRC leadership in Beijing: the Spratly Islands belong to the global commons, and the US Navy is ready for a high-end airpower fight.

Supporting these more assertive FONOPS, the USG must also expand its routine SRO sorties to challenge China's demands for prior permission in its claimed waters, which includes the entire NDZ. Right now, the surge capacity exists to conduct these missions using the sixteen to twenty P-8 Poseidon and EP-3 Ares aircraft assigned to the Seventh Fleet AOR.⁹⁶ As a defensive measure against any potential reactions, carrier-based and expeditionary aircraft must support these missions by conducting armed defensive combat air (DCA) patrols in conjunction with SRO flights. While DCA missions are routine for carrier strike group defense, they have largely been absent from SRO missions, which have seen more escalatory and provocative interactions with PRC fighters since 2001. These SRO missions are completely consistent with UNCLOS and vital to US intelligence capability. However, they must include measures to guard against further aggression from Chinese fighters, which are now operating from Fiery Cross. More airpower providing sanctuary for the SRO aircraft will preempt escalation and serve as a deterrent for Chinese pilots that have repeatedly violated the principle of *due regard* in international airspace.⁹⁷

FONOPS are, arguably, the most successful method of US enforcement of international norms. In the SCS, they unequivocally support all MOEs, and yet, they also generate the most danger for a misunderstanding between US and PRC forces. First, China will certainly condemn

any expansion of FONOPS as a threat to its precarious territorial and maritime claims, which is the entire point of the operation. Historically, China has been the most aggressive against SRO flights, which is exactly why naval forces must defend them. Although there have been several high-visibility incidents, the most notorious was the forced landing of the EP-3 strategic reconnaissance aircraft after suffering a midair collision with a Chinese J-8 Finback II in April 2001. After recklessly attempting to veer the EP-3 off course, J-8 pilot, Wang Wei, collided with the aircraft and died as a result.⁹⁸ He caused so much damage to the EP-3 that it was unable to return to Kadena Air Base on Okinawa and instead diverted to Hainan Island (shown in figure 10).⁹⁹ The PRC then detained the crew and plane, causing an international standoff for more than ten days. Neither side admitted fault, and the PRC disassembled and exploited the plane's sensitive components.



Figure 10: Damaged EP-3 on Hainan Island (2001).

Source: *World History Project*, accessed October 15, 2018,
<https://worldhistoryproject.org/2001/4/1/the-hainan-island-incident>

Although this was the most severe of the many interactions, China has routinely intercepted other aircraft such as the P-8 by employing its advanced fighter aircraft. As the US progresses towards contested FONOPS in the skies over the Spratly Islands, these are exactly the type of dangerous interactions that American aircrew should expect, which is why it is necessary to provide DCA. To date, the Chinese have not attempted to conduct similar intercepts against fighters, which is why the US must employ them. A single-aircraft SRO flight in the Spratly Islands could give PLAN and PLAAF the opportunity to react with incompetence on the scale of the Hainan Island EP-3 incident. As a result, the US should no longer allow PRC aircraft the freedom to conduct intercepts since they have proven that they do not respect the principles of due regard under the ICAO and UNCLOS treaties. As a consequence, FONOPS must test the PRC's resolve and skill in the air.

Just like past FONOPS, these new overflights are consistent with the legal responsibilities of safe flight conduct in international airspace. Despite Beijing's inevitable protest, these flights are likely to maintain international support—the US is one of the few nations capable of power projection and mutual support on the scale required to conduct SCS operations. While overflights of the Spratlys have the highest potential for miscalculation, either by intent or error, they are necessary to give China strategic pause. In the best-case scenario, it could push China to the negotiating table. Alternatively, China could respond by conducting professional intercepts. However, with fighters supporting SRO aircraft, that task will become far riskier. In the worst-case response, China could threaten to target US aircraft using surface-to-air missile systems that are now functional throughout the Spratlys or by employing the robust air defenses of PLAN ships. If China attempts to actually employ a weapon system, that scenario would exceed the competition threshold and drive the situation into potential armed conflict.

During contested missions, as long as the parties remain reasonable and rational, FONOPS provide relatively manageable de-escalation opportunities. If the Chinese change course in the SCS, then the US has the ability to respond in kind by discontinuing direct overflights and returning to less sensitive locations. Conversely, if the PRC continues on its present course, then the US should increase the frequency of both protected SROs and strike packages. Additionally, contested FONOPS requires extensive risk mitigation through supplementary theater rules of engagement and mission rehearsal. The intent is to provide operational commanders and pilots with broad-spectrum guidance and training across the scope of interactions with Chinese aircraft with increasing complexity. These controls will help US forces practice deescalating scenarios before the risks exceed acceptable thresholds. Regardless of the inherent risks, contested FONOPS are an essential player in US power to influence events, and PRC behaviors are ultimately responsible for the future flavor of these missions.

*According to the Law of nature one rules whatever one can.
We did not make this law. We found it when we came to power,
and we shall leave it to those who come after us.*

~ Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

If the world desires the tide of history to bring fair winds to the SCS, the US must drive a just peace by demonstrating its ability to control access to the SCS, strike as a combined expeditionary force with allies and partners, and sustain freedom of navigation in contested environments. China understands only one language—power. It will interpret anything less as capitulation.

Naval forces sit on the precipice of a great power fight that will test the full faith and credit of the USG to provide open access to the global commons, defend allies and partners, and maintain freedom on the seas. The US must prove its commitment to its friends by challenging the PRC's illegitimate claims of 'historic rights' and 'sovereignty.' Other nations do not have the military capability or national will to solve the crisis without American leadership. This is the international challenge of the twenty-first century, and failure to address it will almost certainly shift the needle from competition to conflict.

In the Spring of 1939 at the age of twenty-one, a senior at Harvard University wrote a book titled *Why England Slept*. Published in 1940, the book provided an unpopular and critical analysis of the 1938 Munich Accords, where British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain triumphantly returned from Hitler's Third Reich waving a paper that signed the death warrant of Czechoslovakia. At the time, the US Ambassador to England adamantly opposed America's involvement in this European affair and told President Franklin D. Roosevelt as much. In

contrast to the ambassador's isolationist sentiments, his second eldest son wrote in his book, "[This] was the feeling on confidence and hope that the appeasement policy brought to England. The effect of this was to give the people a feeling of security, which was contagious and spread through all groups. The result was that people felt sacrifices were not necessary – there isn't going to be a war anyway."¹⁰⁰ The author was the future President of the United States, John F. Kennedy. At the time, Kennedy did not have the *ethos* to speak in such a way about England's future fate, but somehow, he had the premonition to judge appeasement as the worst form of statecraft and the surest way to encourage an aggressor. Although organizations such as ASEAN and the United Nations (UN) are certainly taking a more proactive approach towards China than Chamberlain took towards Germany, more assertive military actions need to be on the table to compel a change in behavior.

This research has focused extensively on the role of naval power in combatting the challenge of China's rise. Obviously, other researchers must look deeply at ways in which the other levers of power can maneuver to take a more forceful role in shaping a just outcome. There has been a great deal of effort dedicated by the academic community towards conflict avoidance with the PRC while the Department of Defense has conducted extensive analysis on the character of a future war in the Pacific. However, there has been little courage from either side to face the reality that the US cannot allow the PRC to solidify its positions or take any more ground. If the PRC achieves full control, it is likely that peace and stability will no longer be an option. Perhaps accepting a small rise in tensions now may avoid a disastrous fight later, so that the SCS affair of 2018 does not travel back in time to resemble September 1, 1939. By then, it will be too late.

APPENDIX

Table 1: South China Sea Major Incidents (1946-Present)

Date	Event	Implications
1946	The Republic of China (Taiwan) first occupied Itu Aba in the Spratly Islands (later places permanent garrison on the island in 1956).	Still represents Taiwan's only occupied island in the Spratly Islands.
1947	The Republic of China (Taiwan) published its 11-dashed line map.	Provided the basis of the PRC's claim in the SCS.
Dec 1970	The Philippines occupies five islands in the western Spratly Islands.	Establishes Philippines' claim to the Spratly Islands.
Jan 1974	South Vietnam occupies six islands in the Spratly Islands and establishes the Spratly Islands as a province.	Established Vietnam's modern claim to the Spratly Islands.
Jan 1974	The Battle of the Paracels: China seizes the Parcel Island from South Vietnam by force.	China has controls the entire Parcel Island chain. A fact that exist today.
1982	The UNCLOS is established.	
Aug 1983	Malaysia occupies three islands in the Spratly Islands.	Establishes Malaysia claim to the Spratly Islands.
Oct 1983	Malaysia occupies two additional Spratly Islands.	
Jun 1986	China occupies Fiery Cross Reef in the western portion of the Spratly Islands.	The PRC begins to establish its control of the Spratly Island Chain.
Mar 1988	The Johnson Reef Skirmish: China and Vietnam fight over the Johnson Reef in the Spratly Islands. 74 Vietnamese Sailors died when a transport ship sunk.	China expanded its control over the Spratly Islands.
Mar 1992	CN-VN forces clash near Da Lac Reef.	

Jun 1992	China seizes Vietnamese Cargo ship heading out of Hong Kong.	
Jul 1992	China erects landmark on Da Lac Reef.	
Jul 1994	CN-VN have a naval confrontation off the coast of Vietnam over an oil rig site.	
Dec 1994	China occupies Mischief Reef in the Spratly Islands.	China expanded its control over the Spratly Islands.
Mar 1995	Malaysia fires on a Chinese trawler in Malaysia EEZ.	
Mar 1995	The Philippines' military removes the Chinese from Mischief Reef and destroys Chinese built structures.	
Mar 1995	Taiwan fires artillery towards Vietnamese freighter near Itu Aba in the Spratly Islands.	
Apr 1997	Both China and Philippines place flags and erect markers on the Scarborough Shoal.	
Jan 1998	The Philippines' Navy detain Chinese fisherman near Scarborough Shoal.	
Jan 1999	Vietnam fires upon a Philippines fishing boat.	One Filipino fisherman was injured.
May 1999	China harasses a grounded Philippines vessel in the Spratly Islands.	
Jun 1999	Chinese fishing boat sinks after colliding with a Philippines' naval vessel.	
Oct 1999	Vietnam fires upon a Philippines aircraft near the Spratly Islands.	
May 2000	Philippines troops fire upon a Chinese Fishing boat.	One Chinese Fisherman was killed, seven were detained.
Jan 2001	The Philippines Navy boards 14 Chinese vessels in the Spratly Islands.	
Apr 2001	A Chinese fighter collides with a U.S. Navy intelligence aircraft.	One Chinese pilot is killed, U.S. pilots are detained.
Aug 2001	Vietnam fires upon Philippines aircraft over the Spratly Islands.	
Jul 2008	China warns the U.S. company, Exxon Mobile, to terminate oil deal with Vietnam, claiming it violated Chinese sovereignty.	
Mar 2009	The operations of the USNS <i>Victorious</i> is disrupted by Chinese fishing boats.	
Mar 2009	The USNS <i>Impeccable</i> is harassed by five Chinese vessels 75 miles south of Hainan Island.	

Jun 2009	The Chinese submarine collides with the USS <i>John S. McCain</i> .	
Feb 2011	A Chinese frigate fires warning shot at a Philippines vessel.	
May 2011	Twice, a Vietnamese exploration cable is cut by a Chinese vessel.	
Jul 2011	China detains Vietnamese fisherman and remove them from Paracel Islands.	
Oct 2011	A Philippines Naval vessel rams a Chinese fishing boat.	
Feb 2012	China uses force to prevent Vietnamese fishing vessels from landing at the Paracel Islands during a storm.	
Mar 2012	China detains 21 Vietnamese fisherman near the Paracel Islands.	
Apr 2012	The Philippines and Chinese Navy stand-off near Scarborough Shoal and the Philippines withdrawals in response to US mediation efforts.	China effectively gained control of the Scarborough Shoal.
Nov 2012	China severs a Vietnamese seismic surveillance cable.	
Jan 2013	The Philippines requests arbitration from the UNCLOS on China's territorial claim.	
May 2013	China sends a maritime enforcement ships to the waters near Second Thomas Shoal in the Spratly Islands where the Philippine military are stationed aboard a grounded former US tank-landing ship.	
Dec 2013	An Amphibious Dock Ship of the Chinese Liaoning Carrier Group maneuvered and stopped within 500 meter in the path of the USS <i>Cowpens</i> forcing evasive action. Incident occurred 32 nautical miles south of Hainan Island.	
May 2014	Vietnam and Chinese naval forces clash over a Chinese Oil rig moved within Vietnam's EEZ.	Chinese factor workers are killed by Vietnamese protesters.
Aug 2014	China harasses a U.S. aircraft.	
May 2015	U.S. official express concern of the Chinese land reclamation program on mischief reef.	

Apr 2016	4 x A-10 Thunderbolts and two HH-60 Pave Hawks from the Philippines conduct flight operations in vicinity of Scarborough Shoal.	Establish legal precedent prior to PCA ruling.
May 2016	2 x J-11 Chinese fighters intercept US Navy EP-3 in international airspace in the SCS.	Routine
July 2016	PCA unanimously rejects NDL territorial claims, stating the PRC has no legal or historical basis upon which to make such claims.	Helps establish legal precedence; the international community does not recognize PRC claims.
Dec 2017	PRC completes construction on airfield at Fiery Cross Reef in Spratly Islands.	Spratly Islands now capable of hosting PRC tactical jet aircraft including J-11B Flanker (PRC high-end fighter based on modified Russian Su-27).
May 2018	After PRC lands H-6 bombers on artificial islands in the SCS, US rescinds offer for PRC to participate in <i>RIMPAC</i> military exercises.	PRC is capable of projecting power in SCS via bombers and fighter aircraft.
Oct 2018	USS Decatur (DDG) takes evasive action to avoid collision with PLAN DDG that maneuvered within 45 yds. during FONOPS in the Spratly Islands.	PRC is increasing aggressiveness and risk of its responses.

Source: Jared Wayne Britz, "The South China Sea Territorial Disputes: The Catalyst for a United States-Vietnamese Security Partnership" (University of Massachusetts: Amherst, 2009): 139-141, <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a623626.pdf>.

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¹¹ Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994): 16-18.

¹² Emanuel E. Adler, "Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics," *European Journal of International Relations* 3, No. 3 (2018): 319-363, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/258134901_Seizing_the_Middle_Ground. Describing constructivism, Adler says that "Where they [people] go, how, when and why, is not entirely determined by physical forces and constraints; but neither does it depend solely on individuals' preferences and rational choices. It is also a matter of their shared knowledge, the collective meaning they attach to their situation, their authority and legitimacy, the rules, institutions and material resources they use to find their way...." (pp. 321)

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