

**Deterring the People's Republic of China's Continued Aggression by Reducing U.S. Navy  
Deployments to the South China Sea**

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<b>14. ABSTRACT</b> The South China Sea (SCS) is a strategically important region because of its natural resources, including fisheries and rich hydrocarbon seabeds, and its significant role in maritime shipping. Tensions in this region consisting of excessive maritime claims and harassment instigated by the People's Republic of China (PRC) caused the United States (U.S.) to maintain a constant presence to ensure a free and open Pacific. This presence has taxed the U.S. and its resources with little to no change in PRC activity. To alter the status quo and enable international law enforcement to be the new norm, a change must occur. By reducing deployed naval forces in the SCS, the U.S. can maintain an advantage in deterring PRC aggression and overreaching claims in the SCS. First, the U.S. must vary its time and duration of deployments to the SCS. Uncertainty regarding deployments and operations within the SCS enables the U.S. to dictate the pace of operations and forces the PRC to be reactive. Second, the U.S. must continue to build and forge both bi-lateral and multi-lateral events facilitating interoperability while reinforcing the support of partners and allies. The change in SCS deployment time will likewise enable the expansion of cooperative deployments, strengthening the abilities of allies and partners, all while providing variability in operations with and without U.S. assets. Finally, the reduced number of deployments will aid the U.S. Navy's (USN) ability to recapitalize its force and reinvest the savings into maintenance and expanded capabilities to achieve the strategic goals within the region. With a change in budget priorities, the fleet can acquire new and emerging technologies to hold the PRC at risk while operating outside the first island chain (FIC) with fully mission-capable assets.					
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## Introduction

The South China Sea (SCS) has gained the world's attention over the last 10-15 years not only as a conduit for 33% of the world's shipping commerce valued at \$3.37 trillion but due to the build-up of artificial reefs and features by many nations to include the People's Republic of China (PRC).<sup>1</sup> The PRC has used these gains to their advantage economically and militarily as they work to normalize their claims within the nine-dash line (NDL). As other nations try to reduce the PRC's stronghold in the area by bringing attention to and emphasizing its violations of the United Nations Convention Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the United States Navy (USN) has also tried to enforce a free and open Pacific with regular deployments to the area. Even with these continuous deployments, the PRC has retained the ability to build and enhance these contested features. The status quo for dealing with the PRC has been unsuccessful during the past decade; something different must occur to achieve the desired end state. According to former Secretary of Defense James Mattis, the difference is the United States (U.S.) must "[b]e strategically predictable, but operationally unpredictable."<sup>2</sup>

The U.S. remains strategically predictable within the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) area of responsibility (AOR); however, the current operational environment contains too much predictability to achieve the strategic end-state. By reducing deployed naval forces in the SCS, the U.S. can maintain an advantage in deterring PRC aggression and overreaching claims in the SCS. First, the U.S must vary its time and duration of deployments to the SCS. Uncertainty regarding deployments and operations within the SCS enables the U.S. to dictate the pace of operations and forces the PRC to be reactive. Second, the U.S. must continue

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<sup>1</sup> "How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea," China Power, accessed October 4, 2021, <https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea>.

<sup>2</sup> James Mattis, "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of The United States of America, Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge," (Washington D.C.: Office of the Secretary of Defense) 2018, 5.

to build and forge both bi-lateral and multi-lateral events facilitating interoperability while reinforcing the support of partners and allies. The change in SCS deployment time will likewise enable the expansion of cooperative deployments, strengthening the abilities of allies and partners, all while providing variability in operations with and without U.S. assets. Finally, the reduced number of deployments will aid the USN's ability to recapitalize its force and reinvest the savings into maintenance and expanded capabilities to achieve the strategic goals within the region. With a change in budget priorities, the fleet can acquire new and emerging technologies to hold the PRC at risk while operating outside the first island chain (FIC) with fully mission-capable assets.

### **The Need to Vary Deployment Locations and Duration**

The USN's ability to forward deploy and project power has been the hallmark of the service's strength over the past 245 years and its power has provided the bedrock of deterrence against nearly all adversaries. Despite this asset, the PRC brushes aside the presence of USN warships and strike groups while continuing to build and develop contested features. Starting in 2015, the PRC finished the construction of two runways over 10,000ft in length while completing many major infrastructure projects on outposts located in the contested Spratley Islands.<sup>3</sup> In 2017, the USINDOPACOM commander detailed that warships within his command deploy on an average of 700 ship days per year within the SCS, equating to an average of almost two warships per day within this contested region.<sup>4</sup> This presence has not deterred the PRC from their continuous disregard of the established rules-based order outlined in UNCLOS. The USN's

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<sup>3</sup> "China Island Tracker," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, accessed September 15, 2021, <https://amti.csis.org/island-tracker/china/>.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Dutton and Isaac B. Kardon, "Forget the FONOPS – Just Fly, Sail, and Operated Wherever International Law Allows." Lawfare, accessed August 20, 2021, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/forget-fonops-%E2%80%94-just-fly-sail-and-operate-wherever-international-law-allows>.

focus of effort in this specific region has been unable to slow the advancement of PRC building while continuing to place an operational strain on U.S. forces. Changing the continued presence with an unpredictable and dynamic schedule with varying durations and times of the year would present the PRC with a new challenge of when to prepare for and counter adversarial forces. In order to deter PRC aggression in the SCS, the USN must drive the operational tempo forcing the PRC to react to the new force laydown and location.

Deployment locations within the Indo-Pacific AOR must also change for USN assets to facilitate unpredictability while initiating reactions from the PRC. 700 deployment days to the SCS does not present any challenges to the PRC's ability to maintain a common operating picture (COP) due to the limited sea and airspace within this area.<sup>5</sup> Operating outside the SCS will decrease the proximity to congested territorial seas and airspace, set forth by UNCLOS and international law, by requiring more PRC assets to maintain its COP. Expanding the usual operating areas to the Philippine Sea and the Indian Ocean southwest of Indonesia with a focus close to strategic chokepoints will enable the U.S. to set and maintain an operating area encapsulating the SCS. This would send a message to the PRC that the U.S. can contain all vessels operating within the SCS. This new location would force a different reaction and logistical issues for the PRC as these operating areas are outside of the normal deployment locations at greater distances from PRC home bases. Since the PRC lacks basing options outside of its mainland, extending the U.S. deployment areas eliminates the option to resupply and refuel at ports outside of the FIC thereby decreasing the capability to cover the extended operating regions. Changing deployment operating areas enables the U.S. to level the playing field in

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<sup>5</sup> Dutton, "Forget the FONOPS."

terms of operating distances from their respective homeland and can thin PRC supply lines as the new operational areas are now at greater distances than the previous norms of the SCS.

Changes in frequency, location, and duration enables the U.S. to erode the structure of the PRCs layered maritime defense. The PRC uses its People's Armed Force's Maritime Militia (PAFMM) and Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) to extend the reach of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN).<sup>6</sup> The PLAN provides the forceful back-up when needed for both the CCG and PAFMM when these two entities harass and forcibly remove vessels from other nations' waters the PRC claims as its own.<sup>7</sup> Changing deployment locations outside the SCS would force the PLAN to either shadow USN ships trying to gain intelligence and pattern of life or remain inside the NDL to provide backup for the CCG and PAFMM. Keeping deployment locations the same inside the SCS simplifies the PLAN's decision-making and eliminates split theater operations. The U.S. must force the PLAN to be reactionary and stress their planning and sustainment operations by drawing them further from their sanctuaries close to the mainland.

### **The Importance of Bi and Multi-Lateral Cooperation**

Building a more robust operations plan among allies and partners will reduce the burden on any single country and the predictability of regular deployment schedules. It will also increase interoperability leading to a collective deterrence plan among like-minded nations against a revisionist power on the Asian continent reducing the USN's deployment requirement within the AOR. Conducting both bi and multi-lateral operations with coastal states and other regional allies and partners will strengthen the capabilities of all nations and increase the

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<sup>6</sup> Ryan D. Martinson, *Echelon Defense: The Role of Sea Power in Chinese Maritime Dispute Strategy* China Maritime Studies Institute, U.S Naval War College, 2018, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Martinson, *Echelon Defense: The Role of Sea Power in Chinese Maritime Dispute Strategy*, 3.

credibility of the working relationship of allies and partners. In May of 2019, the U.S. participated in a multi-national exercise occurring within the SCS consisting of six warships from the navies of Japan, India, and the Philippines.<sup>8</sup> This multi-national exercise was the first type of engagement conducted with these specific navies in the SCS and its success will hopefully pave the way for comparable operations in the future.<sup>9</sup> Such multi-lateral exercises facilitate interoperability amongst allies and partners as they enforce international law and the accepted rules-based order. The U.S.'s ability to power project and generate forces enables them to provide the training opportunities and implementation and development of training, tactics, and procedures (TTPs) for the Indo-Pacific region's smaller maritime forces, aiding their ability to become a force multiplier for deterring PRC aggression. As the U.S. continues to train and develop its allies and partners, these nations will step up and lessen the burden placed on the USN, allowing it to decrease its deployments to the SCS.

Exercise MALABAR is another example of how annual engagements increase interoperability between the U.S. and two countries bounding the PRC, Japan and India. According to the Commanding Officer of USS Barry before MALABAR '21, "... [t]he lessons and tactics we share will enhance our strength and capabilities in supporting the common vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific."<sup>10</sup> The lessons learned during these exercises and engagements foster the necessary confidence needed by allies and partners to protect a free and open Pacific and promote the ability to work together without U.S. involvement. The U.S. must continue to encourage these events to create a stronger foundation for PRC deterrence. After this exercise,

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<sup>8</sup> Ankit Panda, US, India, Japan, Philippine Navies Demonstrate Joint Presence in South China Sea. *The Diplomat*, 2019, <https://login.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fus-india-japan-philippine-navies-demonstrate%2Fdocview%2F2222756827%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D322>.

<sup>9</sup> Panda, "US, India, Japan, Philippine Navies."

<sup>10</sup> "Australia, India, Japan, and US Kick-Off Exercise MALABAR 2021," U.S. Embassy & Consulates in India, accessed October 1, 2021, <https://in.usembassy.gov/australia-india-japan-and-u-s-kick-off-exercise-malabar-2021>.

India has scheduled bi-lateral exercises “with the navies of Vietnam, the Philippines, Singapore, Indonesia, and Australia, to enhance coordination with what it called ‘friendly countries’ committed to freedom of navigation.”<sup>11</sup> These engagements provide the opportunity to develop the framework for future endeavors with the capacity to grow into more significant multi-national events. The U.S. needs to applaud and encourage these activities as the ability to build coalitions to enforce established international law maintaining a free and open Pacific strengthens the case for the USN’s ability to reduce deployments within the SCS.

The strength derived from the increased interoperability between like-minded nations operating within the SCS will deny the PRC from becoming the predominant power on the Eurasian continent and reducing the requirement for USN deployments to the region. Nicholas Spykman, a political scientist who focused on foreign policy, stated that for the United States to maintain its national security, no hegemon can exist on the Eurasian continent.<sup>12</sup> Spykman believed the rimlands were the key to becoming a dominant power as these areas contained the heartlands, thereby the resources and fertile land needed to support a potential hegemony.<sup>13</sup> The large coastline of the PRC is conducive to supporting trade, but the majority of the western interior is mountainous and unable to yield a sustainable food source. Denying the PRC the ability to turn the SCS and the area enclosed by the NDL into the rimlands will further prevent it from gaining the necessary area to support a growing empire. The numerous bi and multi-lateral engagements will continue to assert the territorial boundaries of the numerous coastal states, supporting international law and norms, reducing the ability for the PRC to become the

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<sup>11</sup> Amber Wang, “India’s joint South China Sea drills show concern about Beijing, experts say,” *South China Morning Post*, September 4, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3147526/indias-joint-south-china-sea-drills-show-concern-about-beijing>.

<sup>12</sup> Nicholas John Spykman, and Helen R. Nicholl. *The Geography of the Peace*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and company, 1944, 60.

<sup>13</sup> Spykman, and Nicholl. *The Geography of the Peace*, 45.

prevailing power on the Eurasian continent and thereby requiring a significantly smaller presence of USN assets in the SCS.

### **Advancing Technology Through Budgetary Changes**

Finally, reducing the USN's deployment requirements to the SCS also enables the recapitalization of fleet assets while using the savings from the decreased deployments to reinvest into emerging technology yielding the capability to place the PRC at risk at greater ranges. The new technology allows USN assets to add a layer of unpredictability as the longer ranges allow operations further away than usual. According to ADM Grady (ret), former Commander of U.S. Fleet Forces Command, "The growing power competition is putting a premium on US Navy (USN) readiness."<sup>14</sup> Additionally, the demands of Combatant Commanders for certain assets have put a strain on both equipment and readiness.<sup>15</sup> Even with the close of the Afghanistan theater, the pivot to the Pacific theater still requires a 1.0 carrier strike group (CSG) presence within the Indo-Pacific AOR. The demands of continuous presence chip away at the ability to conduct the dedicated maintenance needed to keep these assets fully-mission capable and appropriately trained to generate the necessary readiness when called upon to conduct operations. Keeping assets deployed and limiting maintenance cycles enables the adversary to exploit a weakness as the ability to groom systems for optimized use necessary for deterrence will be unavailable. Keeping resources fully-mission capable and the status quo regarding deployments is extremely expensive and is required to maintain the advantage against any adversary. The FY22 Department of the Navy (DON) budget request codifies this

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<sup>14</sup> Michael Fabey, "Surface Navy 2021: Competition Puts Focus on US Navy Readiness," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 58, no. 7 (2021).

<sup>15</sup> Grace Jean, "Minding the gap: US Navy Balances Presence and Readiness Demands on its Stretched Carrier Fleet," *Jane's Navy International* 120, no.8 (2015).

sentiment. The proposal only asks for two new major surface combatants as funding is allocated for the current fleet to receive the required upkeep to retain its ability to fulfill its intended service life.<sup>16</sup> Maintaining the advantage requires reducing deployments to the SCS enabling the budgetary change needed to upgrade and grow the fleet.

Upgrading the fleet with current and emerging technology is required to keep the PRC at risk outside the FIC. The new variant of the Tomahawk cruise missile will have a range exceeding 1,000 miles.<sup>17</sup> The implementation of the MQ-25 unmanned aerial vehicle enables the extended organic tanking for both 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> generation aircraft assigned to the CSG bringing an advanced stealth capability. New technology balances the smaller ship and aircraft production rates as these advanced capabilities bring the older assets in the fleet to a standard able to break through the anti-access, area-denial veil erected by the PRC. By stretching the adversary's resources and supply lines due to the longer ranges and limited detection advanced technology brings to the fight, the U.S. can keep deployments to outside of the FIC. Additionally, the extended ranges provided by these advances can hinder the adversary's ability to find and fix targets, especially around the areas surrounding the eastern portion of the FIC primarily due to the surrounding geography. Using these advancements allows USN assets to reduce deployments to the SCS as they now possess the means to target the PRC at ranges well outside of the FIC.

Reducing the operating and maintenance (O&M) budget to increase funding for research and development (R&D) will provide the USN with the needed weapons and technology with the ability to outpace the adversary especially with the strategic shift to the INDOPACOM AOR.

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<sup>16</sup> Department of the Navy FY 2022 President's Budget, 8.

<sup>17</sup> David Larter, "The US Navy has an upgraded Tomahawk: Here's 5 things you should know," accessed October 5, 2021, <https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2020/12/14/the-us-navy-has-an-upgraded-tomahawk-heres-5-things-you-should-know>.

The FY22 budget allocates \$56.12 billion for O&M while only allocating \$19.88 billion for R&D.<sup>18</sup> At 34%, O&M funding is the majority share of the DON budget as operations deter the nation's adversaries.<sup>19</sup> However, a 1% decrease in O&M funding equates to a 2.9% increase in R&D funding enabling the rapid development of needed improvements to deter the PRC's advancements in the SCS. Upgrading older variants provides a cost-effective method to expand capabilities as "[t]he missile has been able to stay at the \$1 million price range, which is on the low end for missiles".<sup>20</sup> The U.S. must find a way to get the most out of every dollar when competing against the PRC presenting them new challenges. Cost savings from O&M will facilitate the availability of more funds to be used by R&D yielding advanced technology implemented more quickly into the fleet allowing the U.S. to regain the advantage over its peer competitor in the AOR. The U.S. will retain the capability to deter and intimidate the PRC outside of the FIC enabling a change to the status quo and balance of power in the SCS.

### **The Need for More Deployers**

On the other hand, one can argue that the USN must maintain or increase its current deployment time to the SCS to deter PRC aggression within the AOR. The "Pivot to Asia" policy enacted during the Obama administration shifted "60 percent of all American naval and air force units" to the Asia-Pacific theater by 2020.<sup>21</sup> The increase in military units within the AOR aids the commander in generating forces for deployment to the SCS confirming the "Pivot to Asia" policy. Additionally, the FY22 DON budget request allows deployed ships to operate

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<sup>18</sup> DON, 6.

<sup>19</sup> DON, 6.

<sup>20</sup> Larter, "The US Navy has an upgraded Tomahawk."

<sup>21</sup> Kijoo kim, "Changes in U.S. Security and Defense Strategy Toward China: Assessment and Policy Implications." *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 32, no. 4 (2020): 545, <http://usnwc.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=tsh&AN=148923384&site=ehost-live>.

underway for 58 days per quarter.<sup>22</sup> Japan alone homeports 15 major surface combatants ready to deploy as part of the Forward Deployed Naval Forces-Japan (FDNF-J).<sup>23</sup> The deployment cycle of FDNF-J assets coupled with deployers from Hawaii and the continental United States (CONUS) can generate more than 700 ship days in the SCS. An increase in deployers will send a strong signal to both the PRC and the coastal states of the SCS of the U.S.'s commitment to a free and open pacific and the protection of the rights guaranteed by international law. Also, increasing the presence of USN warships enable the push back of the PRC's echelon as the CCG and PAFMM do not have the capabilities to stand up to the advanced craft.<sup>24</sup> The push back of PRC maritime units allows the navies and coast guards of the SCS coastal states to operate within their territorial seas without harassment from the PRC. Additional presence with more USN assets will enable the implementation of international law and rights guaranteed from UNCLOS, resetting the status quo in the SCS.

Increasing the number and type of deployers to the SCS will force the PRC to change deployment size and patterns to counter the increased presence. The decline in the strength of the USN vis-à-vis the PRC has contributed to the growing number of clashes in the SCS as the PRC has continued its aggression regarding territorial claims within these waters.<sup>25</sup> The research of Sara Mitchell quantifies this claim: "... [S]tates with greater naval strength initiate more diplomatic claims to maritime zones."<sup>26</sup> Expanding the USN's presence lowers the PRC's overall strength and helps bolster that of the U.S.'s partners and allies within the region. Using a combination of CSG's, cruiser/destroyer groups, and amphibious ready groups (ARGs) along

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<sup>22</sup> DON, 12.

<sup>23</sup> "Ships," United States Navy, accessed October 2, 2021, <https://www.surfpac.navy.mil/Ships>.

<sup>24</sup> Martinson, *Echelon Defense: The Role of Sea Power in Chinese Maritime Dispute Strategy*, 28.

<sup>25</sup> Sara McLaughlin Mitchell, "Clashes at Sea: Explaining the Onset, Militarization, and Resolution of Diplomatic Maritime Claims." *Security Studies* 29, no. 4 (2020): 638.

<sup>26</sup> Mitchell, "Clashes at Sea," 656.

with land and sea-based aircraft provide exponential growth of sea power when compared with the PRC. The U.S. possesses the advantage with deployment duration and the ability to mass force consistently over time compared to the PRC complementing the maritime forces of the coastal states. These deployments will be a constant challenge to excessive PRC claims while reminding the rest of the world its actions are a violation of international law guaranteed by UNCLOS. The capabilities and numerical strength of the U.S. with the addition of allies and partners will reduce the relative strength of the PLAN, yielding a decrease in maritime claims and a return to the rules-based order defined by UNCLOS.

### **Conclusion**

Maintaining or increasing USN deployment to the SCS will not alter the status quo established by the PRC. During the past decade, the USN has had a constant presence within the SCS and despite the “Pivot to Asia” policy, the PRC has continued to build and expand its outposts in the region. A change must occur with the USN’s deployment strategy in the SCS during the great power competition with the PRC to effect change and adjust the established norms. The U.S. must realize that pulling back and expanding the operating area will equate to a position of greater strength. Since this is a “home game” for the PRC, the U.S. must stretch the battlefield placing some of the same constraints and vulnerabilities on the adversary. Varying deployment locations to surround the NDL and changing the timeframes and durations will enact stressors on the PRC’s logistical and intelligence nodes. These new and larger operating areas will reduce the PRC’s probability of detection if there is no change in force posture. Forcing the PRC to modify its operations for the PLAN will cause friction, uncertainty, and a lack of constant presence yielding power to the like-minded nations following international law. Additionally, keeping the PLAN outside the NDL will cause the PAFMM and CCG to lose their

forceful backup, eventually causing those assets to lose their ability to harass the smaller vessels of coastal nations. Breaking down the echelon defense used by the PRC is a key to weakening the strength of the PRC and allowing the rules-based norms to prevail within the SCS leading to a reduced requirement for USN assets to deploy in this region.

Increasing cooperation and interoperability with allies and partners will further support the sharing of force utilization within the SCS. As the coastal nations along with other regional countries support the effort to enforce international law and promote a free and open Pacific, the U.S. has the capacity to reduce the assets required to operate in the SCS without sacrificing its ability to project power and exude presence within the INDOPACOM AOR. A unity of effort by all SCS stakeholders will foster a collective deterrence against the PRC, reducing its chance for dominance in the region. As many nations adhere to the established norms and procedures outlined by UNCLOS and supported by international law, any action taken by the PRC against these regulations will lessen legitimacy claimed by the PRC. Reducing the PRC's legitimacy will diminish its ability to exert dominance over neighboring countries within the SCS.

Finally, the increased capacity due to smaller deployment requirements enables the U.S. to expand its weapons inventory gaining parity with its peer competitor in the region. According to ADM (ret.) Davidson, the path to a free and open Pacific depends on the ability to “develop an agile and distributed Joint Force designed to deter and deny our adversaries of their objectives in the first and second island chains...”<sup>27</sup> Modern and advanced weapons are needed to deter the adversary and gaining valuable funds via reduced deployed operations will add needed R&D budget lines. Reducing USN deployments to the SCS will cause the required unpredictability, through budgetary changes and the increased presence of allies and partners, to deter PRC

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<sup>27</sup> Admiral Philip S. Davidson, U.S. Navy Commander, U.S. INDO-PACIFIC Command, “Testimony,” Senate, *U.S. INDO-PACIFIC Command Posture*, March 9, 2021, 3.

aggression in the SCS and a return of the rules-based order with the following and enforcement of UNCLOS. These changes will enable the U.S. to gain the advantage during the great power competition with the PRC.

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