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**THE STRATEGIC SHORTCOMINGS OF  
INDOPACOM FREEDOM OF NAVIGATION OPERATIONS**

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The U.S. military operates around the globe at a bustling pace and sweeping scale, particularly in the crucial Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) theater. On an average day in 2021, the United States had approximately 160,000 troops serving overseas, 80 Navy ships cruising the world's oceans, and 4,000 Air Force aircraft supporting active units.<sup>1</sup> Few of these operating forces waged kinetic warfare, the ultimate purpose for which militaries are designed. Instead, many performed shaping activities below the level of armed conflict. INDOPACOM has intensified its shaping activities as U.S. defense strategy has increasingly prioritized balancing against China's growing military power. One high-profile shaping activity has involved using freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) to contest excessive maritime claims by China and other countries. U.S. officials have stressed that INDOPACOM FONOPs help advance American goals vis-à-vis China. However, some experts have questioned their strategic effectiveness.

This paper side with the skeptics, arguing that INDOPACOM FONOPs have performed relatively poorly at balancing against Chinese military power across four criteria essential to successful strategy: deterrence, warfighting, long-term competition, and reassurance. In each area, FONOPs have not improved America's position relative to China. This ineffectiveness owes more to the limitations of shaping activities and the complexities of China's rise than to mistakes made by INDOPACOM. That said, the current situation presents an opportunity for INDOPACOM to innovate by adopting an alternative approach. INDOPACOM should pursue a

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<sup>1</sup> James Siebens, Ryan Lucas, and Jocelyn Wang, "US Global Force Posture and US Military Operations Short of War," Stimson Center, 14 July 2021, accessed 23 November 2021, <https://www.stimson.org/2021/us-global-force-posture-and-us-military-operations-short-of-war/>; U.S. Naval Institute, "USNI News Fleet and Marine Tracker: Nov. 22, 2021," *USNI News*, 22 November 2021, accessed 23 November 2021, <https://news.usni.org/2021/11/22/usni-news-fleet-and-marine-tracker-nov-22-2021>; and Air Force Magazine, *Air Force & Space Force Almanac 2021* (June/July 2021): 73, accessed 23 November 2021, [https://www.airforcemag.com/app/uploads/2021/06/Almanac2021\\_Fullissue-1.pdf](https://www.airforcemag.com/app/uploads/2021/06/Almanac2021_Fullissue-1.pdf).

policy of technology substitution by using unmanned vessels and aircraft to perform the FONOP tasks currently being performed by manned platforms. Using unmanned platforms for FONOPs presents advantages in the areas of deterrence, warfighting, and long-term competition, and INDOPACOM can mitigate risk in the one area where technology substitution could present disadvantages, reassurance, by engaging closely with allies and partners.

The paper unfolds as follows. Section 1 elaborates on the strategic problem summarized in the introduction. Section 2 outlines the four strategic criteria. Section 3 uses the criteria to assess INDOPACOM FONOPs. Section 4 concludes by outlining a new technology substitution policy for INDOPACOM FONOPs.

## **1. Shaping Activities and FONOPs: Concepts, Trends, and Critiques**

The concepts related to FONOPS require further explanation to facilitate analytical clarity. To begin with, shaping activities consist of routine military actions below armed conflict that set conditions for successful theater operations by demonstrating resolve, strengthening alliances, dissuading adversaries, and enhancing crisis response capabilities.<sup>2</sup> Analysts sometimes refer to shaping activities using other terms such as routine, day-to-day, phase zero, or steady-state operations; military, naval, or gunboat diplomacy; forward or naval presence; and the political use of force. Although the semantics vary, the terms all denote military actions below armed conflict that recur and serve political objectives, mirroring the definition above.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The definition synthesizes shaping and forward presence as defined in, respectively, Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), *Joint Operations*, Joint Publication (JP) 3-0 (Washington, DC: CJCS, 22 October 2018): V-9; and JCS, *Joint Maritime Operations*, JP 3-32 (Washington, DC: CJCS, 20 September 2021): GL-5.

<sup>3</sup> Kevin Rowlands, “‘Decided Preponderance at Sea’: Naval Diplomacy in Strategic Thought,” *Naval War College Review* 65, no. 4 (2012): 90–99; and Larissa Forster, *Influence without Boots on the Ground: Seaborne Crisis Response*, Newport Paper 39 (Newport, RI: U.S. Naval War College, 2013): 68–72.

When explaining shaping activities, U.S. officials often cite as examples FONOPs, exercises, forward deployments and patrols, and port calls.<sup>4</sup> The U.S. government describes its Freedom of Navigation Program as follows:

[C]omplementary diplomatic and operational efforts to safeguard lawful commerce and the global mobility of U.S. forces. The Department of State protests excessive maritime claims, advocating for adherence to international law, while the Department of Defense (DoD) exercises the United States' maritime rights and freedoms by conducting operational challenges against excessive maritime claims.<sup>5</sup>

Trends in INDOPACOM FONOPs have changed considerably in recent years. In 2015, INDOPACOM completed two South China Sea FONOPs and one Taiwan Strait transit and used FONOPs to challenge eight excessive maritime claims in the region.<sup>6</sup> In 2020, by contrast, it completed eight South China Sea FONOPs and 13 Taiwan Strait transits and used FONOPs to challenge 15 excessive maritime claims. China typically responds to U.S. FONOPs with political and rhetorical protests, though it has also dispatched forces to tail American ships and aircraft.<sup>7</sup> These responses indicate that U.S. FONOPs affect Chinese perceptions and elicit Chinese reactions.

U.S. officials have asserted that shaping activities help achieve American objectives. As Admiral Phil Davidson, former INDOPACOM commander, noted, “Nearly a third of global

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<sup>4</sup> Department of Defense (DoD), *Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: DoD, 2015): 23; and Harry B. Harris, Jr., “Testimony,” *Maritime Security Strategy in the Asia-Pacific Region: Hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee*, 114th Cong., 1st sess., 2015.

<sup>5</sup> DoD, *Annual Freedom of Navigation Report: Fiscal Year 2020* (Washington, DC: DoD, 2021): 1.

<sup>6</sup> Ronald O'Rourke, *U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 6 October 2021): 39; DoD, *Annual Freedom of Navigation Report: Fiscal Year 2015* (Washington, DC: DoD, 2016): 1–2; and DoD, *Annual Freedom of Navigation Report: Fiscal Year 2020*, 3–6.

<sup>7</sup> Ji You, “The Sino-US ‘Cat-and-Mouse’ Game Concerning Freedom of Navigation and Flights: An Analysis of Chinese Perspectives,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 39, no. 5-6 (2016): 637–661.

maritime trade, roughly 3.5 trillion dollars, goes through the South China Sea every year.”<sup>8</sup> If these trade flows got disrupted, the global economy on which the United States depends would suffer. The United States thus has a national interest in maintaining freedom of the seas in the South China Sea and throughout INDOPACOM, and FONOPs function as one tool for accomplishing that goal.

Although U.S. officials publicly champion INDOPACOM’s shaping activities, some experts have raised concerns about their strategic effectiveness. FONOPs consume significant resources, including operation and support funds, leadership attention, and equipment wear and tear.<sup>9</sup> The benefits gained from incurring these costs remain hard to discern. As Russell Rumbaugh, a former Pentagon official recently nominated to become assistant secretary of the Navy for financial management, once observed, “[N]obody understands our exercise portfolio let alone an ‘engagement’ portfolio [...] It is a terribly fact free debate, including within the [Pentagon] building.”<sup>10</sup> The routineness of FONOPs can become a weakness if they fail to adapt to changed circumstances. In 2018, the operations officer for an American B-52 squadron forward deployed to Guam commented, “The region has evolved but the mission has remained constant.”<sup>11</sup> The officer meant the comment positively in the sense of operational consistency, but it inadvertently implied stagnation in INDOPACOM’s shaping activities.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Phil Davidson, “China Power: Up for Debate” (virtual address, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC, 29 November 2018), accessed 30 November 2021, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/Speeches-Testimony/Article/1702301/china-power-up-for-debate/>.

<sup>9</sup> Robert O. Work, “A Slavish Devotion to Forward Presence Has Nearly Broken the U.S. Navy,” *Proceedings* 147, no. 12 (2021).

<sup>10</sup> Russell Rumbaugh, e-mail message to author, 31 August 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Brian W. Everstine, “Bombers Watching Over the Pacific,” *Air Force Magazine*, 29 August 2018, accessed 30 November 2021, <https://www.airforcemag.com/article/bombers-watching-over-the-pacific/>.

<sup>12</sup> In 2020, DoD ended the continuous bomber presence mission in Guam in favor of deploying bombers from the continental United States on varying schedules, an approach linked to what DoD calls dynamic force employment. Diana Stancy Correll, “The Air Force Has Stopped Its Continuous Bomber Presence Mission in Guam,” *Air Force*

U.S. officials generally do not acknowledge the potential shortcomings of FONOPs in public. Doing so might discourage allies, encourage adversaries, or undercut the Pentagon's justifications for force structure and budgets. As a result, few government-affiliated studies have examined INDOPACOM FONOPs, leaving a knowledge gap on a crucial topic.<sup>13</sup> To start filling that gap, the next section outlines four criteria for assessing FONOPs.

## 2. Four Strategic Criteria

The second step in assessing the strategic effectiveness of INDOPACOM FONOPs vis-à-vis China involves selecting the criteria with which to evaluate them. As a simplifying assumption, this paper contends that FONOPs should be assessed with the same criteria used to evaluate U.S. military strategy toward China more generally. The logic behind this assumption is straightforward: FONOPs comprise one subcomponent of U.S. military strategy and so should be judged by the same standards as the broader strategy they support. In making this simplifying assumption, the paper prioritizes military considerations over legal, economic, or diplomatic issues, though it acknowledges their importance.

Although numerous potential criteria exist for evaluating FONOPs, four factors rise to the top: deterrence, warfighting, long-term competition, and reassurance.<sup>14</sup> This quadripartite framework captures the paramount Indo-Pacific military considerations while remaining

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*Times*, 21 April 2020, accessed 30 November 2021, <https://www.airforcetimes.com/news/your-air-force/2020/04/21/the-air-force-has-stopped-its-continuous-bomber-presence-mission-in-guam/>.

<sup>13</sup> A noteworthy recent exception is Miranda Priebe et al., *Operational Unpredictability and Deterrence: Evaluating Options for Complicating Adversary Decisionmaking* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2021).

<sup>14</sup> Aaron L. Friedberg, *Beyond Air-Sea Battle: The Debate over U.S. Military Strategy in Asia* (New York: Routledge/International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2014).

parsimonious, making it well suited for the paper's analysis. After briefly outlining the four factors below, the next section applies them to INDOPACOM FONOPs.

- Deterrence: The first factor to consider is whether INDOPACOM FONOPs deter China. Deterrence involves threatening harm to persuade an adversary not to take an action.<sup>15</sup> In the case of INDOPACOM FONOPs, what action is the United States persuading China not to take? Moreover, what harm is the United States threatening China with? Strong deterrence postures function even amid crises, discouraging the move from peace to war.
- Warfighting: A second factor involves warfighting. If deterrence failed, how might U.S. FONOPs affect U.S. combat operations against China? Warfighting assessments undoubtedly affect deterrence, and vice versa, but considering the factors separately can expose inconsistencies. Warfighting also raises the issue of escalation control because how nations fight affects the likelihood of escalation.
- Long-term competition: A third factor meriting attention is long-term competition, meaning the evolving costs and risks borne by adversarial nations during an extended period of peacetime military competition. If FONOPs cost the United States relatively little while causing China to spend disproportionate sums or pursue less threatening capabilities, then FONOPs represent an advantageous move in long-term competition.
- Reassurance: The fourth factor involves reassuring allies and partners about the steadfastness of U.S. intentions and capabilities. The United States will require allied

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<sup>15</sup> Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966): 69–73.

support during virtually any military conflict with China, at minimum for basing access, so allied confidence matters greatly. Do U.S. FONOPs increase allied confidence in America's willingness and ability to uphold its commitments in the Indo-Pacific?

### **3. Assessment of INDOPACOM FONOPs**

#### Deterrence

INDOPACOM FONOPs have failed to stop unwanted Chinese behavior. U.S. officials often describe the goal of FONOPs as maintaining freedom of the seas. But that goal is not particularly relevant to deterrence because it does not stipulate a specific adversary or prohibited action. A more relevant deterrence goal is, for example, persuading China not to increase its excessive maritime claims. By that standard, INDOPACOM FONOPs have failed at deterrence. From 2015 to 2020, excessive Chinese maritime claims increased from five to seven according to U.S. data.<sup>16</sup> Admiral Davidson judged that “China is now capable of controlling the South China Sea in all scenarios short of war with the United States.”<sup>17</sup> INDOPACOM FONOPs thus have not deterred the Chinese behavior that they are most clearly trying to prevent.

INDOPACOM FONOPs have failed to deter China's maritime expansionism in part because the threat to harm China is not severe enough to elicit Chinese compliance. Perhaps the greatest threat posed by U.S. FONOPs is undermining the Chinese regime's domestic credibility by demonstrating to the Chinese public that U.S. military forces can openly defy Chinese claims. However, China has largely neutralized this threat by asserting publicly that U.S. FONOPs

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<sup>16</sup> DoD, *Annual Freedom of Navigation Report: Fiscal Year 2015*, 1–2; and DoD, *Annual Freedom of Navigation Report: Fiscal Year 2020*, 3–6.

<sup>17</sup> O'Rourke, *U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas*, 16.

represent unchecked aggression. In response to a February 2021 U.S. FONOP, for example, a Chinese military spokesperson accused the U.S. military of “seriously damaging regional peace and stability.”<sup>18</sup> By challenging the legitimacy of U.S. FONOPs, China has successfully protected itself against the greatest threat associated with U.S. FONOPs, domestic political embarrassment, thereby diminishing their deterrence value.

### Warfighting

INDOPACOM FONOPs have not improved U.S. preparedness to fight China. If anything, FONOPs have decreased warfighting readiness by subjecting platforms and personnel to additional wear and tear, leaving them less ready to perform wartime missions.

In theory, FONOPs could benefit U.S. warfighting readiness in at least four ways. They could provide U.S. personnel with operational experience that would improve their performance during combat. They could collect valuable intelligence. They could sensitize China to certain operational practices, enabling the United States to surprise China by suddenly changing practices during wartime. Lastly, they could pre-position U.S. platforms in key geographical areas, giving them a head start during armed conflict.

In practice, FONOPs provide the United States with minimal benefits in these areas. Personnel can gain the requisite operational experience through patrols or exercises rather than FONOPs. Alternative collection methods can acquire most of the intelligence gathered during FONOPs. Any sensitization of China achieved by FONOPs is relatively limited given the small number of U.S. platforms involved. Finally, a lone destroyer or patrol aircraft pre-positioned

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<sup>18</sup> Zachary Haver, “US Conducts 1st South China Sea Freedom of Navigation Op Under Biden,” *Radio Free Asia*, 5 February 2021, accessed 2 December 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/usa-southchinasea-02052021171547.html>.

forward during a FONOP provides little wartime advantage because it lacks supporting forces nearby and so cannot mass fires, reducing its offensive and defensive effectiveness.

In exchange for these minimal warfighting benefits, INDOPACOM FONOPs incur a significant cost: eroding readiness. The 2010 Balisle Report judged that the Navy's high operational tempo – driven by shaping activities such as FONOPs – threatened the long-term readiness of the surface fleet.<sup>19</sup> The comprehensive review of the causes of four surface ship accidents in INDOPACOM concluded that the Navy had sacrificed long-term readiness to accomplish near-term missions such as FONOPs.<sup>20</sup>

### Long-term competition

INDOPACOM FONOPs have not provided the United States with any significant advantages in long-term competition against China. U.S. FONOPs likely have not caused the Chinese military to spend money on weapons systems or operational deployments that it would not have invested in anyway. If U.S. FONOPs had caused reactionary Chinese expenditures, then Chinese weapons modernization and deployment trends should have changed noticeably from 2017 to 2020, the period when INDOPACOM increased South China Sea FONOPs to 6.5 per year, on average, versus only 2.5 in the preceding four-year period.<sup>21</sup> Yet the best available evidence indicates that Chinese modernization and deployment trends generally maintained their previous trajectories from 2017 to 2020, suggesting that U.S. FONOPs did not elicit any major material responses.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Philip M. Balisle, *Fleet Review Panel of Surface Force Readiness*, 26 February 2010.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Bayer and Gary Roughead, *Strategic Readiness Review*, 3 December 2017.

<sup>21</sup> O'Rourke, *U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas*, 39.

<sup>22</sup> DoD, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2021* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, November 2021).

One reason China has avoided the cost-imposing potential of U.S. FONOPs is because Beijing can respond operationally with its maritime militia rather than its regular military. China's maritime militia consists of Chinese citizens working in the maritime economy who receive training from the military to perform missions such as surveillance and search and rescue.<sup>23</sup> The militia's operating costs are presumably lower than the regular military's operating costs since the militia lacks comparable quantities of specialized equipment and personnel. Additionally, Chinese provincial and city governments fund a significant portion of the militia's operating costs, meaning the Chinese military avoids the bill.<sup>24</sup> As a result, the Chinese military can respond to expensive U.S. FONOPs using inexpensive militia forces partially paid for by someone else. Given these dynamics, U.S. FONOPs stand little chance of putting China on the wrong side of the cost-exchange curve anytime soon.

### Reassurance

INDOPACOM FONOPs have not reassured allies and partners as much as one might expect. Despite the growth of U.S. South China Sea FONOPs from 2017 to 2020, a 2019 poll of respondents in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) found that two thirds believed U.S. engagement with Southeast Asia had declined and one third reported little or no confidence in the United States as a strategic partner and regional security provider.<sup>25</sup> In 2018, the then prime minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad, publicly criticized the U.S. practice of performing FONOPs with warships, saying, "We understand the need for security, and the need

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<sup>23</sup> Shuxian Luo and Jonathan G. Panter, "China's Maritime Militia and Fishing Fleets: A Primer for Operational Staffs and Tactical Leaders," *Military Review* 101, no. 1 (2021): 12.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>25</sup> Zack Cooper and Gregory Poling, "America's Freedom of Navigation Operations Are Lost at Sea," *Foreign Policy*, 8 January 2019, accessed 3 December 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/08/americas-freedom-of-navigation-operations-are-lost-at-sea/>.

for security will be resolved with simple patrol boats.”<sup>26</sup> To be clear, such views do not represent the entire range of opinion about U.S. FONOPs within INDOPACOM. Some allied leaders view American policy more positively. Nevertheless, the uneven support among allies and partners demonstrates that INDOPACOM FONOPs have not inspired unvarnished confidence about U.S. strength in the face of potential Chinese aggression.

#### **4. Conclusion: Unmanned Systems as an Alternative Approach**

The disappointing performance of INDOPACOM FONOPs provides an opportunity to rethink the current approach. The most promising alternative policy would entail substituting in unmanned vessels and aircraft to perform FONOPs in the future.<sup>27</sup> Unmanned systems could conduct more frequent FONOPs following less predictable tracks than manned systems, potentially complicating Chinese contingency plans and thus increasing deterrence. Unmanned systems conducting FONOPs near key geographic locations in isolation from supporting forces would provide warfighting advantages that manned systems cannot provide. If war broke out, these unmanned systems could conduct the equivalent of rapid suicide missions against high-value Chinese targets, a sacrificial role the United States would never assign to manned warships costing billions of dollars. Finally, unmanned systems would satisfy the legal requirements for FONOPs but would cost far less to procure and operate than manned systems, improving America’s position relative to China in long-term competition.

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<sup>26</sup> *The Straits Times*, “Mahathir Tells US: No Warships in Asean Waters but Small Patrol Boats are Fine,” 15 November 2018, accessed 3 December 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/mahathir-tells-us-no-warships-in-asean-waters-but-small-patrol-boats-are-fine>.

<sup>27</sup> Trevor Prouty, “Freedom of Navigation Operations: A Mission for Unmanned Systems,” *War on the Rocks*, 2 July 2021, accessed 3 December 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/07/freedom-of-navigation-operations-a-mission-for-unmanned-systems/>.

One downside of unmanned FONOPs would likely be allies and partners feeling less assured by unmanned systems. They might continue to prefer the powerful symbol of the United States placing service members in harm's way. To address this concern, INDOPACOM could stress to allies and partners that using unmanned systems for FONOPs will free up the manned platforms currently performing FONOPs to execute other theater security tasks or receive additional maintenance, yielding a net increase in allies' security. The shift to unmanned FONOPs will encounter challenges, on this and other issues, but judicious planning and persistent engagement by INDOPACOM can create the conditions for success.