



China's Maritime Challenge in the South China Sea: Options for US Responses

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China's growth in naval power is proceeding at a remarkable rate and foreshadows a change in the regional maritime balance of power. The United States will move from being the preeminent naval power in the region to one that China challenges, if not overtakes, over time. The implications for US strategic interests are enormous, all the more so if there is a future scenario in which China and the United States come into direct conflict. A veritable cottage industry of analysis has grappled with the question of whether a war between the two countries is likely or even inevitable—avoiding the “Thucydides Trap” has become a near obsession of American analysts and scholars in recent years. Answering that question is beyond the scope of this paper, but the potential for armed conflict between the two sides—particularly in hot spots like the South China Sea where China has expanded its maritime control—cannot be underestimated. Washington must respond to these challenges forcefully, but carefully, in ways that utilize the full extent of US military, political, and economic power.

China's enhanced maritime capabilities and strategic footprint in the South China Sea presents a uniquely complex challenge to US policymakers. This is partly due to the fact that China is not yet an adversary, despite a growing strategic rivalry with the United States. All-out conflict between the two powers would, in some respects, make the US strategic response to China's challenge more clear-cut. It would call existing war plans into action and commence combat operations against Chinese military assets. Instead, China's exploitation of grey-zone tactics in the South China Sea, such as its so-called “cabbage” strategy of wrapping disputed islands in layers of civilian, paramilitary, and military protection, complicates an effective US response. Indeed, “grey hull” naval responses to paramilitary or civilian “white hull”

intrusions can quickly escalate tensions and lead to a conflict that both sides want to avoid.

Due in part to the complexity of the situation, some critics believe Washington has no strategy for coping with China's maritime challenge in the South and East China seas. This is particularly true when it comes to China's land reclamation activities. As Ben Dolven et al., write: "The question of whether the United States has a strategy for dissuading China from continuing its land reclamation activities, or for responding to those activities, and if so, whether that strategy is adequate, is part of a larger question. That larger question is whether the United States has an overarching strategy for countering China's various so-called 'salami slicing' tactics for incrementally gaining a greater degree of control over land features, waters, and air space in the East and South China Seas, and if so, whether that overarching strategy is adequate."¹

For the time being, the primary US strategy for countering China's land reclamation activities is to conduct freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) near China's reclaimed islands in order to reinforce the Pentagon's pledge to "fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows." This approach has certainly caught Beijing's attention, but it is unclear whether it has done much to stop land reclamation activities from proceeding. Despite Chinese Foreign Minister Wan Yi's claim in August 2017 that reclamation and landfill activities were halted two years ago, experts at the Center for Strategic and International Studies argue that such activities have continued in the Paracel Islands.² Nor has the tough rhetoric by top US officials deterred China from continuing other "salami slicing" and "cabbage strategy" activities in contested waters in the South and East China seas.

Some critics argue that the US approach to China's growing assertiveness in the South and East China seas is overly risk averse and that Washington's default position has been to deescalate tensions before they reach a boiling point. This has allowed incremental gains by China. These critics argue that more coercive measures should be taken to dissuade and deter China from asserting undue influence in the maritime domain, as Ely Ratner writes: "In order to alter China's incentives, the United States should issue a clear warning: that if China continues to construct artificial islands or stations powerful military assets, such as long-range missiles or combat aircraft, on those it has already built, the United States will fundamentally change its policy toward the South China Sea. Shedding its position of neutrality, Washington would stop calling for restraint and instead increase its efforts to help the region's countries defend themselves against Chinese coercion."³ Ratner adds that the United States should provide other countries in the region with "counterintervention" capabilities such as surveillance equipment, land-based anti-ship missiles, fast-attack

¹ Ben Dolven, Jennifer K. Elsea, Susan V. Lawrence, Ronald O'Rourke, and Ian E. Rinehart, "[Chinese Land Reclamation in the South China Sea: Implications and Policy Options](#)," CRS Report, Congressional Research Service (June 18, 2015): 21.

² See "[Update: China's Continuing Reclamation in the Paracels](#)" on the CSIS Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative website

³ Ely Ratner, "[Course Correction: How to Stop China's Maritime Advance](#)," *Foreign Affairs* (July/August 2017): 69.

missile boats, and mobile air defenses.⁴

There are signs that the Trump administration is taking a less risk-averse approach toward Chinese advancements in the South China Sea. According to news reports, the US Navy is planning more regular FONOPs in the area—as many as two or three a month—as opposed to the more ad hoc approach practiced during the Obama administration.⁵ The more regular operations are meant to assert US freedom of navigation while reassuring allies that the United States is still committed to the regional and maritime status quo. It remains to be seen, however, whether this more aggressive approach will deter further land reclamation activities and artificial island-building or whether it will significantly raise tensions with Beijing. So far, China responded harshly to the increased FONOP activities, expressing “strong dissatisfaction”, for instance, with a FONOP mission by the *USS John S. McCain* near a man-made island close to Mischief Reef in August 2017.⁶

Aside from increased FONOPs, the United States has continued to work closely with allies in the region in order to reassure them of US strategic commitments in the face of increased Chinese assertiveness. This effort has had mixed results. To some degree, the United States has already been engaged in the kind of capacity-building, intelligence-sharing, joint exercises, and other cooperative efforts with allies that critics say are necessary for countering Chinese actions. For instance, Dolven, et al. write: “This [maritime capacity-building] has included providing equipment and infrastructure support to the Vietnamese coast guard, helping the Philippines build a National Coast Watch System to improve its maritime domain awareness, and conducting sea surveillance exercises with Indonesia which recently included flight portions over the South China Sea for the first time.”⁷ US naval commanders have also been seeking ways to promote security networking among allied nations, such as Japan and the Philippines, and to encourage ASEAN member states to eventually develop a “combined maritime patrol” in the South China Sea.⁸ Such forms of maritime cooperation do not just benefit regional players coping with China’s growing assertiveness but may help offset the shifting naval power balance by encouraging greater burden-sharing among regional stakeholders.⁹

Similarly, the United States can help to strengthen regional multilateral institutions that support maritime security, such as the ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting-Plus (ADMM+). This is an often-heard refrain, and the Trump administration’s skepticism toward multilateral institutions aside, US attention toward ASEAN and other regional institutions has waxed and waned throughout the years. The failure of high-level officials of the George W. Bush administration to attend meetings such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), for instance, led to perceptions among many Southeast Asian observers that the United States was somehow less committed to the region. Given

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Teddy Ng, “[US ‘planning more regular’ South China Sea patrols](#)” *Agence Free Press*, September 2, 2017.

⁶ “[China Protests US Ship Sailing Past an Artificial Island in South China Sea](#),” VOA News, August 11, 2017.

⁷ Dolven et al., 22.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Cronin et al., 34.

these sensitivities, maintaining US commitments to these institutions is essential for supporting maritime rules, norms, and practices that are being challenged by Chinese military and paramilitary activity in the region.

Aside from these diplomatic efforts, there are a number of more muscular measures the United States could take, short of war, to address China's maritime challenge. First and foremost, would be maintaining a steady acquisition of naval vessels to counterbalance China's military buildup. There is near consensus among experts that maintaining a certain degree of ship-to-ship parity with the Peoples' Liberation Army-Navy (PLAN) is fundamental to deter China from pursuing more aggressive gains in the maritime domain. Some experts, however, believe that the United States is falling behind in this regard, as Cronin et al. assert: "The US Navy is not adequately sized or outfitted to meet US national security requirements in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. With some forecasts predicting that the size of the PLAN may approach 500 ships and submarines by 2030, the US Navy must improve qualitatively and quantitatively if it is to provide a credible deterrent force that can fight and win at sea—certainly in the direction of 350 ships."¹⁰

Some analysts believe that one area where the US Navy still enjoys a qualitative and quantitative advantage over the PLAN is in submarines. While this may be particularly true when factoring in the submarine fleets of allies like Japan, other experts question whether or not this advantage is as clear-cut as widely assumed.¹¹ James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara argue that the quality of the US Navy's submarine fleet is still superior to anything the PLAN has, but that the quantity of submarines may be insufficient to meet current challenges. Although there are 55 US Navy attack submarines (SSNs) operating in the Pacific, they estimate that when factoring in routine upkeep, maintenance, and crew rest, only about 22 SSNs are deployable at any given time—a stark number given "the vastness of the China seas and Western Pacific in wartime."¹² Even in peacetime, US submariners may find it difficult to engage in "hold at risk" missions to track and trace Chinese ballistic missile submarines (SSBN) patrols that are likely to begin this year.¹³ All of this suggests that the US Navy's qualitative and quantitative superiority in submarines may be ephemeral at best.

While shipbuilding itself is not an insurmountable task for a nation with the resources of the United States, it is not a foregone conclusion that such numerical targets like 350 ships is easily attainable given the substantial range of military requirements the nation faces as the world's preeminent superpower. As Holmes and Yoshihara argue: "Competition is about far more than gee-whiz weaponry or comparing entries in *Jane's Fighting Ships*. It is about politics. It is about how much of a nation's naval power the political leadership is prepared to hazard in combat, considering the

¹⁰ Cronin et al., 33.

¹¹ While this may be particularly true when factoring in the submarine fleets of allies like Japan, other experts question whether or not this advantage is as clear-cut as widely assumed.

¹² James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, "[Taking Stock of China's Growing Navy: The Death and Life of Surface Fleets](#)," *Orbis*, (Spring 2017): 282.

¹³ Cronin et al., 33.

political stakes along with competing requirements elsewhere around the world.”¹⁴ It is worth noting, furthermore, that these competing requirements are never static, as new crises and concerns inevitably emerge in an ever-changing global security environment.

Still, an increase in naval vessels is not the only part of the equation. The United States must invest in other air and land-based weapons systems in order to fully meet the challenges of China’s military and naval buildup, including its enhanced anti-access capabilities on land, sea, and air. As Cronin et al. write: “Of course, it is not just the Navy but also the requisite Marine, Air Force, and Army capabilities that will be essential to a larger joint force capability that is credible and versatile. As China’s developing rocket force suggests, air and ground forces are now a critical part of maritime security.”¹⁵ Indeed, as Holmes and Yoshihara remind us: “Lord Horatio Nelson, who knew a thing or two about operating fleets under the shadow of shore-based weaponry, counseled sagely that a ship’s a fool to fight a fort. Nelson would blanch at Fortress China’s capacity to strike hundreds of miles out to sea without even having its battle fleet get underway.”¹⁶

To better mitigate against Fortress China’s shore-based weaponry, the United States needs to develop and deploy longer-range missile systems than are currently at its disposal. In particular, improving surface-ship missile ranges to counter China’s arsenal of YJ-18 missiles is an immediate imperative. The measures taken by the Pentagon thus far are stopgap in nature. For instance, write Holmes and Yoshihara: “Repurposing the SM-6 anti-air missile for anti-ship missions, as the Pentagon’s Strategic Capabilities Office did last year, provides a gap filler. But it is not a permanent substitute. The SM-6 is an expensive anti-air missile. Every round expended against an enemy surface vessel is a round not available to fend off Chinese aircraft or missiles. The opportunity costs of pressing it into surface-warfare duty are heavy.”¹⁷ Clearly, more investment will be needed in the future to develop and deploy ship-based missile systems that can out-distance China’s missiles and rockets launched from both land and sea.

One option that is currently underway is to convert the US Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS), a truck-mounted rocket launcher, into an anti-ship guided ballistic missile platform. With ranges of up to 300 kilometers, the ATACMS can slightly outdistance China’s YJ-18 anti-ship missiles with their estimated range of 290 kilometers. Although land-based, the ATACMS have the advantage of being transportable by truck, thus making them a more difficult target for enemies to locate and strike (otherwise known in US military parlance as the ability to “shoot and scoot”). According to a 2013 RAND report, the ATACMS could be used to deter China by raising the cost of naval conflict with the United States and for enforcing a blockade of critical waterways in times of war.¹⁸

¹⁴ Holmes and Yoshihara, 279.

¹⁵ Cronin et al., 33.

¹⁶ Holmes and Yoshihara, 280.

¹⁷ Ibid, 281.

¹⁸ Jeremy Hsu, “[The Army Gets Back in the Ship-Killing Business](#),” *Wired*, March 1, 2017.

Additionally, the Pentagon has announced the development of the next generation of vehicle-launched missile systems after the ATACMS, the so-called Long-Range Precision Fires (LRPF, or “DeepStrike” missiles), which can hit land and sea targets some 499 kilometers away. The DeepStrike missiles, launched from a High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS), would significantly enhance the US Army’s role in the maritime domain. As Kyle Mizokami explains: “That would make the Army capable of fulfilling PACOM head Admiral Harry Harris’ dream of getting the Army back in the business of sinking ships. The idea is that in any future air-land-sea conflict, particularly in the Pacific, Army forces could land on an island or coastline, bring DeepStrike with them, and immediately project a 309 mile “no-go” zone against enemy targets on both land and sea.”¹⁹

Aside from the anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) applications of these new land-based missile systems, they could also be part of US and allied measures to counter China’s “cabbage” strategy and other grey zone activities in the South China Sea. By stationing land-based missiles on allied territories, the United States and its allies in the region could have the land-based firepower to deter Chinese encroachments in disputed areas. This would likely go a long way toward assuring allies of the US commitment to protect against Chinese expansion in the South and East China seas.²⁰

Eventually, this approach could be the cornerstone of a new US strategy for countering China’s “cabbage” tactics. That is, mimicking China’s strategy of claiming contested islands by wrapping them in layers of civilian, paramilitary, and military protection. These steps could deny China’s access to disputed islands in the South China Sea, a move that some fear could trigger increased tensions with Beijing. Indeed, as Alexander L. Vuving argues: “Many are concerned that regardless of its legality, blocking China’s access to its occupied islands would amount to an act of war and risk armed conflict as a response. This fear is overblown, however. When China blocked others’ access to the disputed Scarborough Shoal and Second Thomas Shoal, nobody called it an act of war and no armed conflict ensued. Taking a leaf from China’s own book, the cabbage tactic of access denial would mute the *casus belli* and discourage Beijing from going to war.”²¹

Beyond such confrontational approaches, the United States and its allies can also seek various political and economic levers to induce China to consider the costs of disrupting the maritime status quo in the South China Sea. China’s use of economic

¹⁹ Kyle Mizokami, “[The Army Is Getting a New Long-Range Tactical Missile](#),” *Popular Mechanics*, June 16, 2017. For more on the LRPF, see Sydney J. Freedberg Jr., “[New Army Long-Range Missile Might Kill Ships, Too: LRPF](#)” *Breaking Defense*, October 13, 2016.

²⁰ See Evan Braden Montgomery, [Reinforcing the Front Line: US Defense Strategy and the Rise of China](#), Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2017: 38.

²¹ Alexander L. Vuving, “[How America Can Take Control in the South China Sea](#),” *Foreign Policy*, February 13, 2017. While this argument makes some degree of sense, the author appears to discount the fact that China’s overwhelming military superiority versus other claimants in the South China Sea is perhaps one reason why they exercised restraint in confronting China’s land-reclamation activities.

leverage to achieve political means is well documented.²² A similar approach could also be used by the United States to compel Beijing to abide by established rules and norms in the maritime domain or risk economic sanctions and greater restrictions on Chinese businesses operating internationally. This “hit-them-where-it-counts” approach might also be used to expand military sales and aid to Taiwan, a move that would certainly raise Beijing’s ire. Similarly, the United States could seek to further accelerate the already growing defense cooperation with India—a nation of strategic significance in the Indo-Pacific maritime domain. Whether such moves would actually affect China’s calculations of the costs and benefits of its aggressive activities in the South China Sea, or merely add to regional tensions, remains uncertain.

Amidst these more confrontational approaches, the prospect of broader cooperation with China in the maritime domain should not be completely written off. It bears reminding that US and Chinese interests on the high seas can sometimes overlap, creating opportunities for greater cooperation. As Cronin et al. write: “China’s quest for blue-water naval capabilities does not imply competition with the United States at every turn. If China is able to conduct noncombatant evacuation operations, secure the flow of natural resources, or contribute to humanitarian aid and disaster relief, the United States and its partners may see ample interest in collaborating with the PLAN around the world. By identifying where it may be able to cooperate with China’s navy, the United States and its partners can attempt to bound the areas of competition. This, in turn, will allow Washington and its allies to direct naval resources where they are most needed, and to burden-share where and when this can be accomplished.”²³ Thus even if Washington seeks to engage and cooperate with Beijing in areas where their interests intersect in the maritime domain, it can still prepare for scenarios and contingencies where their interests may diverge.

It would appear, then, that the United States and its partners must employ a multi-faceted strategy for confronting China’s growing naval and maritime influence in the South China Sea. No single approach is comprehensive enough to address this broad a challenge. It will require increased investments in military technology, shipbuilding, and training. It will require adjustments in maritime strategy—particularly as it applies to grey zone areas—and notions of deterrence. It will require diplomatic engagement to reinforce and build alliances and partnerships throughout the region. And it will require steadfast leadership and commitment to ensure that the United States meets the considerable challenges posed by an increasingly sophisticated and capable Chinese maritime force operating in the South China Sea and beyond. ■

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²² See, for instance, Evan A. Feigenbaum, “[Is Coercion the New Normal in China’s Economic Statecraft?](#)” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, July 25, 2017.

²³ Cronin et al., 35.