

The Dilemma of China's Strategy in the Western Pacific

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Abstract

China's recent actions in the western Pacific are strategically challenging for the United States. This paper explores how China's history, specifically the Century of Humiliation, influences and shapes China's strategies in the East and South China Seas. In addition to excessive maritime claims in the contested Spratly Islands of the South China Sea, China is also at odds with Japan and Taiwan over the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea. Furthermore, China seeks to advance its regional influence through the role of benefactor in the Philippines, pledging infrastructure investment while exploiting the cooling relationship between the United States and the Philippines. The United States Navy and Army, having maintained a continuous presence in the region for over a century, provide American leadership with options for countering Chinese activities in the region. Pragmatic and non-provocative actions will enable the United States to peacefully support its allies and partners while checking the militarist actions of China in the region.

The Dilemma of China's Strategy in the Western Pacific

The 20th century presented a variety of strategic challenges for the United States. Large-scale conflicts included the two World Wars, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and Operation DESERT STORM towards the end of the century. Large-scale wars were not the only type of strategic dilemma encountered by the United States, however. The Cold War encompassed almost half of the century and while full-scale armed conflict never erupted from the Cold War, the Cold War brought with it multiple strategic crises that had global implications. For example, the Cuban Missile Crisis brought the United States to the brink of nuclear warfare with the Soviet Union, a conflict that most certainly would have devastated the entire global community.

The 21st century, while less than twenty years old, also has strategic dilemmas that affect the United States. Unlike the conflicts of the past that found nations fighting nations, either in large or small conflicts, the character of conflict in the 21st century has evolved. The War on Terror highlights the fact that adversarial nations are no longer the only threat to the security of the United States. Non-state actors, like Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), threaten the interests of the United States just as much as Japan or Germany did in World War II. Even more unique is the fact that non-state actors, like ISIS, are extremely difficult to counter because the borders of a single country do not confine their fighters. Instead, many non-state actors are trans-regional and affect interests in every corner of the globe. At its height, ISIS conducted simultaneous operations against its enemies, including the United States, in Syria, Yemen, and Southeast Asia. Additionally, the global reach of non-state actors has the potential to bring recruits from any country in the world.

The War on Terror certainly presents strategic difficulties for the United States. Yet, the United States faces another dilemma on the far side of the Pacific Ocean. China's rise as a regional power presents multiple strategic challenges for the United States. While China's rise in power should not in itself concern the United States, recent Chinese conduct in the western Pacific produces strategic challenges in a region already beset with difficulties for the United States.

Multiple key United States allies reside in the western Pacific region. Together with South Korea, the United States continues to stare across a demilitarized zone into a hostile North Korea. Japan remains a close ally and hosts numerous United States military bases on the mainland and in Okinawa. The Philippines, a former colony of the United States, continues to share a mutual defense treaty. While permanent United States presence ceased following the closing of Naval Station Subic Bay and Clark Air Force Base in 1992, a military relationship continues to this day. Thailand also shares a defense treaty and is the oldest United States ally in the region.

These key allies, plus blossoming partnerships with Vietnam and Malaysia, strengthen and yet complicate the United States position as it finds itself staring at China's increasing power and regional influence. Over the past decade, China's increased military strength, the creation of an Air Defense Identification Zone in the East China Sea, and the land reclamation projects and militarization of the South China Sea has increased regional tension, especially since much of the world's trade passes through the waters of the South and East China Seas.

The United States has and continues to view the western Pacific as a region of vital national interest. Aside from supporting United States allies and partners in the

region, former president Barack Obama highlighted American prioritization of a “rules-based international order advanced by U.S. leadership that promotes peace, security, and opportunity through stronger cooperation to meet global challenges.”¹ President Trump’s inaugural National Security Strategy stressed the risk the western Pacific region faces under aggressive Chinese influence.² Furthermore, the United States, along with much of the world, views the maritime domain as a global commons free for all nations to utilize without infringing on the sovereignty of another state. Based on recent actions in the South and East China Seas, China challenges that concept.

While China’s policies related to the western Pacific are strategically challenging for the United States, there are options for America’s senior leaders. This paper will thoroughly discuss the historical background driving China’s policies and then analyze China’s strategy in the western Pacific. While a whole-of-government approach will ultimately be required for a successful American regional strategy, this paper will specifically highlight the military component and identify the roles the United States Navy and Army can fill to safeguard United States interests in the region. Ultimately, this paper will recommend that American actions increase regional stability, reassure United States partners and allies in the region, and protect freedom of navigation in the western Pacific.

Historical Background

China possesses an ancient and accomplished history spanning over 4,000 years, credited for inventing paper, printing, firearms, blast furnace steel production, and lock systems for canals.³ The first known Chinese dynasty with a centralized government was the prehistoric Xia Dynasty and originated around 2070 BC.⁴ While subsequent dynasties saw art and culture flourish, they were not without conflict.

Multiple uprisings and revolts resulted in overthrown kingdoms. This cycle continued for almost 2000 years and included the epoch known as the Warring States period (476-221 BC), in which seven Chinese states fought each other for control of what is now modern China. Some of the most recognizable Chinese names, including the philosopher Confucius and the military strategist Sun Tzu, come from this period of Chinese history.⁵

Internal struggles were not the only conflicts to impact ancient China. North of China, nomadic tribes roamed arid plains and deserts. Many times, these nomads would invade China and occupy much of the land in the north. For that reason, China built the Great Wall of China as a measure to keep the nomads from conducting further invasions. To China's fortune, vast mountain ranges buttressed the western and southwestern borders, protecting China from foreign infiltration. Additionally, the vast Pacific Ocean and South China Sea protected China on her Eastern and Southeastern borders.⁶

However, the 19th and 20th century saw an industrialized Europe and its colonial imperialism on a scale not yet seen. European powers, such as Britain and France, expanded their empires to the borders of China and while China was never colonized, European powers gained influence in some major Chinese cities.⁷ In 1842, Great Britain defeated China in the First Opium War and what followed was China's "Century of Humiliation," a term many historians use that covers the period from 1840 until 1949. Many experts agree it was during this period that China suffered shame at the hands of western powers. China also realized their comparative weakness to the western world, both militarily and diplomatically.⁸

During the Century of Humiliation, China allowed western powers to control certain coastal ports and gave up other territories, such as Hong Kong. Japan, which China viewed as inferior, changed its political and military system to adapt to the western powers. This proved vital, as Japan was able to defeat China towards the end of the 19th century, gaining control of Taiwan and other parts of China. Multiple rebellions, resulting in the death of millions of people, occurred in response to the presence of foreigners. Independence movements in Tibet and Mongolia in the early 20th century further reduced China's territory. World War II and a long internal civil war devastated China's landscape and people even more. The birth of the People's Republic of China (referred to as 'China' for the remainder of this paper) in 1949 by the Chinese Communist Party following the civil war finally ended the Century of Humiliation.⁹

Because of historical internal conflicts, past nomadic invasions from the north, and western subjugation during the Century of Humiliation, China now employs a grand strategy designed to ensure history will not repeat itself. China's historical experience, especially at the hands of western powers, traumatized a country that viewed itself as being the center of the civilized world. Since 1949, a return to the top of the global community is China's ultimate goal, a peer with any western power and most certainly with the United States. Following the incidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade by the United States in 1999, China's *People's Daily* newspaper, an official state newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party, displayed this mentality with a published article titled "This is Not 1899 China." It stated:

The wheel of history will not go backward. This is 1999, not 1899. This is not ... the age when people can barge about the world in gunboats ... It is

not the age when the Western powers plundered the Imperial Palace at will, destroyed the Old Summer Palace, and seized Hong Kong and Macao ... China is a China that has stood up; it is a China that defeated the Japanese fascists; it is a China that had a trial of strength and won victory over the United States on the Korean battleground. The Chinese people are not to be bullied, and China's sovereignty and dignity are not to be violated ... US-led NATO had better remember this.¹⁰

During testimony before the U.S-China Economic and Security review Commission, a committee created by the United States Congress in 2000 to monitor the national security implications of the bilateral trade and economic relationship between the United States and the People's Republic of China, Center for Naval Analyses China analyst Alison A. Kaufman asserted that the Chinese Communist Party continues to employ the Century of Humiliation narrative and remains deeply suspicious of the West. Additionally, the People's Liberation Army produces publications that claim western nations remain greedy and aggressive. During a 2004 speech, former Chinese president Hu Jintao warned that western forces still want to subdue China.¹¹ These viewpoints create the framework that drives China's strategy in the western Pacific, specifically in the South and East China Seas.

China's Western Pacific Strategy

During the Chinese civil war in 1947, the Republic of China (present-day Taiwan) published a map that outlined its territorial claims in the South China Sea. Following victory in 1949, the People's Republic of China adopted the same claims, defined by a 9-dash line encompassing most of the South China Sea.¹² In 1958, China released an official state declaration reiterating its claim to all of the land features of the South China Sea.¹³ These land features within the 9-dash line include the Paracel Islands, the Spratly Islands, and Scarborough Shoal. However, other countries dispute China's claims to these land features. The Republic of China continues to claim the same land

features of the South China Sea as they did in 1947. Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines also claim many of the land features in the Spratly Islands. Regardless of the competing claims, China maintains the 1947 position regarding the land features in the South China Sea, continuing to claim sovereignty over the land features. Since 1949, China has slowly pushed its strategic perimeter south from the mainland to the Spratly Islands, expelling anyone in their path.

Similar to the South China Sea, the East China Sea has its own set of disputed land features. The Senkaku Islands are located approximately 200 miles east of mainland China, 100 miles northeast of Taiwan, and 250 miles west of Okinawa. While the islands are uninhabited, they are rich with resources. Lush fishing grounds and the strong potential for undersea oil and gas are the main reason Japan, China, and Taiwan each claim sovereignty over the islands. Japan took control of the islands after defeating China in the First Sino-Japanese War in 1895. While the United States briefly controlled the islands following World War II, it relinquished control to Japan in 1972.¹⁴ Since that time, both China and Taiwan have challenged Japan's authority over the islands. All three countries universally refute the opposing claims.

As part of its strategy in the East China Sea, China routinely violates Japanese territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands. Chinese fishing and coast guard vessels maintain a near constant presence around the islands, despite protests by the Japanese government. Ships from both China and Japan have collided on more than one occasion. In response, Japan increased its defense budget in 2016 specifically to counter Chinese aggression around the Senkaku Islands, focusing on the procurement of more coast guard vessels.¹⁵

In 2013, as the dispute over the Senkaku Islands raged on the surface, China established a formal Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) that covers the Senkaku Islands and overlaps with Japan's ADIZ, prompting a united outcry from the United States and Japan.¹⁶ China executes a similar strategy above the East China Sea as it does on the surface, routinely sending Chinese aircraft to circumnavigate the Senkaku Islands or into other parts of the Japanese ADIZ. In response, Japan scrambles alert aircraft to protect its territory. From April 2015 through March 2016, Japan launched 1,168 alerts, averaging three alert launches a day. Chinese incursions in the East China Sea accounted for 73% of the launches.¹⁷

China also seeks to execute the role of benefactor to other countries in the region. Following his election in 2016, Philippine President Duterte visited with his Chinese counterpart, President Xi Jinping. President Duterte even turned down the opportunity to visit President Trump at the White House, making a second trip to China instead. At his 2017 keynote speech at the World Economic Forum in Cambodia, President Duterte stated that the "future of the Philippines is in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and in Asia" and further intoned that rather than confrontation with China, dialogue and cooperation between China and the Philippines was in the best interest of both countries.¹⁸ China, exploiting the developing chasm between the Philippines and the United States, currently plans to provide billions of dollars in infrastructure investments to the Philippines.¹⁹

China's planned investment in the Philippines follows a similar strategy executed in Sri Lanka a decade ago. China poured more than \$1.5 billion into the small coastal town of Hambantota, constructing a large port, an international airport, and multi-lane

freeways. However, when it was time for Sri Lanka to pay the bills for the infrastructure investments, the government was unable to do so and forfeited control of the port instead.²⁰ China promotes foreign infrastructure development as beneficial to both China and the country they are helping to develop. The reality, however, is often the opposite.

The Prioritization of Sea Power

The first step China took toward successful achievement of its western Pacific strategy once again called upon history. Since the days of ancient Greece, great powers had one thing in common: they all possessed robust sea power. In its prime, the city-state of Athens controlled a regional alliance called the Delian League. Comprised of over 300 city-states, all located in the eastern portion of the Mediterranean Sea around the coast of present day Turkey and the Aegean peninsula, the Delian League banded together to resist Persian aggression. Over time, however, Athens' maritime dominance and increased control of the alliance evolved into the Athenian empire. No other city-state in the Delian League could compete with Athens in the maritime domain.²¹

Likewise, sea power enabled Great Britain, France, and even Spain to expand their spheres of influence into North and South America in the 16th and 17th centuries. Great Britain's dominance of the seas also enabled it to expand its empire into Southeast Asia in the 19th and 20th centuries. Today, the United States Navy is the most powerful in the world and its sea power allows the force to sail anywhere on the globe, protecting American national interests abroad.

In the late 19th century, United States Navy Rear Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan wrote a book called *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783*. In it, Mahan outlined his theory of sea power, teaching that sea power "includes not only the military

strength afloat, that rules the sea or any part of it by force of arms, but also the peaceful commerce and shipping from which along a military fleet naturally and healthfully springs, and on which it securely rests.”²² A country possessing enough sea power has the capacity to protect its commerce and produce greater wealth through trade in the process. Increasing maritime dominance allows “a country to acquire colonies and overseas possessions...this in turn increase[s] its strength and therefore its capacity.”²³

This was exactly the case for the United States at the beginning of the 20th century. The United States acquired new colonies in the Pacific, including Hawaii, Guam, and the Philippines, following its victory in the Spanish-American War, but soon realized the United States Navy was not prepared to defend these new territories. American leadership made plans to expand the capacity of the United States Navy, procuring new ships with more capabilities. From December 1907 until February 1909, a new fleet of United States Navy battleships, dubbed the Great White Fleet, sailed around the world and showcased the new American maritime might that was capable of protecting American interests around the globe.

In the past 15 years, China prioritized the same modernization efforts and significantly increased the capabilities of the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLA[N]). While the PLA(N) does not yet have peer capabilities with the United States Navy, they are quickly closing the gap and maintain a significant maritime advantage over neighboring navies. Additionally, the total number of Chinese surface combatants (destroyers, frigates, and corvettes) and submarines (both diesel and nuclear) have increased since 2000 and are projected to continue increasing in number over the next

decade.²⁴ Considering that 40% of China's overall trade transits through the South China Sea, the PLA(N) now stands ready to protect China's commerce in the region.²⁵

In *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783*, Mahan argued that certain conditions affect sea power. Arguably, the most important concept is that of geographical position. The geographical position of a country gives "further strategic advantage of a central position and a good base for hostile operations against its probable enemies."²⁶ In 1974, China fought South Vietnam for control of the Paracel Islands in the South China Sea. The clash resulted in victory for China, and since that time, China has retained control of the Paracel Islands and created a military base on one of the islands, Woody Island. China continues to expand their sphere of influence in the South China Sea further south towards the disputed Spratly Islands. Today, China controls seven of the land features in the Spratly Islands, three of which contain robust military facilities. While China claims Subi Reef, Mischief Reef, and Fiery Cross Reef, these are not strictly military bases as the Chinese government has also touted tourism as a driving factor. Nonetheless, each reclaimed reef boasts self-defense systems, port facilities, and airfields capable of supporting every aircraft in the Chinese inventory.²⁷ The strategic advantage and sea power China enjoys in the South China Sea cannot be understated. They are the only Southeast Asian country with the capacity to safeguard their national interests from forward operating bases scattered throughout the South China Sea.

Obstacles to China's Strategy

While China has largely ignored the maritime claims of its neighbors, in both the South China Sea and the East China Sea, China's expansion has not been without complication. In 2014, China and the Philippines had a minor clash near Half Moon

Shoal, a contested land feature in the Spratly Islands. A Filipino coast guard vessel seized a Chinese fishing boat and arrested 11 Chinese fishermen, detaining them on the Philippine island of Palawan and enraging the Chinese government.²⁸

A similar confrontation occurred in 2012 near Scarborough Shoal, a traditional Filipino fishing ground located approximately 120 nautical miles west of the Philippine island of Luzon. Following the initial confrontation, Chinese coast guard vessels denied fishing access to Filipino fishermen. However, following President Duterte's visit to China in October of 2016, Beijing restored fishing access to the Philippines.²⁹

Because of the maritime disputes between the Philippines and China, the Philippines sought mediation in the Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2014, claiming that China's historical claims in the South China Sea violated the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). UNCLOS, most recently revised in 1982 and ratified by both China and the Philippines (in addition to Vietnam and Malaysia), defines territorial waters, economic exclusion zones, and the process of making maritime claims. The arbitration tribunal deliberated on the case for almost three years, claimed that China's arguments were without merit, and ruled in favor of the Philippines. The tribunal stated that "China's claim to the historic rights to the living and non-living resources within the 'nine-dash line' is incompatible with the Convention to the extent that it exceeds the limits of China's maritime zones as provided by the Convention." Furthermore, the ruling stated that China's "[h]istorical navigation and fishing, beyond the territorial sea, cannot therefore form the basis for the emergence of a historic right."³⁰ While the outcome was technically a win for the Philippines, China's disregard for the decision nullifies the Court's power. China continues to claim sovereignty to the

land features of the South China Sea and is “firm in upholding its sovereignty over Nanhai Zhudao [the South China Sea islands] and their surrounding waters.”³¹

Implications of Chinese Actions

While China’s disregard for the arbitration tribunal’s ruling is troubling for the United States, the developing relationship between the Philippines and China is equally disturbing. Numbers from recent polling since President Duterte’s inauguration in 2016 reinforce this fact. Filipinos who favor closer trade relations with China jumped from 43% to 67%. Similarly, the number of Filipinos favoring confrontation with China now stands at 28%, falling from 41% in earlier polling.³² While the decaying relationship between the United States and the Philippines is concerning, the military relationship between America and the Philippines has also declined considerably. While President Duterte has not revoked the mutual defense treaty shared with the United States, he has restricted military cooperation with the United States. Counterterrorism and humanitarian aid operations continue but maritime security cooperation has dropped off significantly. Moreover, President Duterte adamantly opposes outside interference in regional disputes, subtly referring to the United States and the South China Sea maritime disputes.³³

The strategic position that China now enjoys in the South China Sea is also troublesome to the United States. As a vital artery of global trade, roughly one-third of the global market transits the South China Sea by boat. China benefits most from this trade as 40% of its total trade comes via the South China Sea. Twenty percent of Japan’s total trade comes through the South China Sea, too. Twelve percent of the United Kingdom’s trade and 23% of Brazil’s trade also transit through the South China Sea, highlighting the impact the region has on the global community.³⁴ With its forward

operating bases on Subi Reef, Fiery Cross Reef, and Mischief Reef, China possesses the ability to affect global trade, if it so chooses.

China's forward operating bases also raise another concern. Some Chinese experts are concerned that China's militarization of the South China Sea is preparation for a future South China Sea ADIZ, similar to the ADIZ created in 2013 in the East China Sea. Given the distance of the Spratly Islands from mainland China, the only way for China to enforce an ADIZ is by forward-deploying military aircraft to the Spratly Islands, a capability Subi Reef, Fiery Cross Reef, and Mischief Reef provide.

The political landscape in the South China Sea is certainly more complex than the one found in the East China Sea. While only disputing one land feature with Japan in the East China Sea (Senkaku Islands), China disputes multiple land features in the South China Sea with as many as five other nations. Establishing an ADIZ above the overlapping claims in the Spratly Islands would likely upset Malaysia, Vietnam, Brunei, and the Philippines. In 2016, then-United States Deputy Secretary Robert Work warned China that if they established an ADIZ in the South China Sea, the United States would not honor it. In response, China's Ministry of National Defense spokesman, Colonel Yang Yujun, made clear that China has "repeated [their] position on many occasions" and that "to set up an ADIZ is the right of a sovereign state and we don't need other countries to make suggestions."³⁵ China's intentions are clear, and while they currently make no outward move to form an ADIZ over their interests in the South China Sea, they firmly believe they have the right to do so and will establish an ADIZ if they feel compelled to do so by outside actors.

United States Military Presence the Western Pacific

Since its victory over Spain in the Spanish-American War, the United States has maintained continuous interest in the western Pacific. The addition of the Philippines and Guam as United States territories following the war required the means to protect them. In addition to modernizing the United States Navy, the United States forward deployed military forces to the region. The United States Navy created Naval Station Subic Bay, located near Manilla, in 1901 and operated from Subic Bay until the United States transferred custody of the base to the Philippine government in 1992. At the time, it was one of the largest naval stations in the world and served as a central point for United States Navy operations in Southeast Asia.³⁶

As the United States Navy developed Subic Bay following the Spanish-American War, the United States Army acquired a base of their own in the Philippines. First established as base for cavalry and later developed as an airfield, the United States operated Clark Air Base following the Spanish-American War until the United States government also transferred custody to the Philippines. Like Subic Bay, Clark Air Base served as a vital hub for both the United States Army Air Corps and United States Air Force. At its height, Clark Air Base was the largest American air base outside of the United States.³⁷

With the closure of both Subic Bay and Clark Air Force Base, forward-deployed United States military forces remain in South Korea, Japan (including Okinawa), and Guam. The United States Navy's Seventh Fleet, located in Yokosuka, Japan, is the largest of the United States' Navy's forward-deployed fleets. Thirty-six countries and 50% of the world's population fall under Seventh Fleet's area of operation. Additionally, 50-70 surface ships and submarines, roughly 150 aircraft, and nearly 20,000 Sailors fall

under the Seventh Fleet commander on a daily basis.³⁸ The ships and aircraft currently forward deployed in the Seventh Fleet area are generally the newest in the fleet and contain the latest technology. Other ships, submarines, and aircraft from the United States mainland routinely deploy to Seventh Fleet, complementing forward-deployed naval forces while conducting operations in the western Pacific. This regularly includes one aircraft carrier strike group.

The United States Military as a Strategic Counter in the Western Pacific

With a continuous forward-deployed presence in the western Pacific, the United States military is a strategic tool that American leaders can utilize, on short notice if required, to counter China's strategy in the region. Current United States Navy operations, such as freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) and foreign exercise participation, already frustrate China and complicate their efforts in the South China Sea.

The United States executes FONOPs under the Freedom of Navigation Program, established in 1979.³⁹ Starting in 2015, the United States Navy has conducted FONOPs in the South China Sea as a means of challenging China's excessive maritime claims. The United States Navy conducted just three FONOPs in 2016 and four FONOPs in 2017.⁴⁰ In January 2018, the guided missile destroyer USS HOPPER conducted FONOPs near Scarborough Shoal. During the FONOPs, the USS HOPPER exercised the right of innocent passage. Per UNCLOS, innocent passage means "navigation through the territorial sea for the purpose of...traversing that sea without entering internal waters." UNCLOS also stipulates, "Passage shall be continuous and expeditious."⁴¹ Following the USS HOPPER's FONOP, a United States Navy spokesperson stated:

The United States conducts routine and regular FONOPs...as we have done in the past and will continue to do so in the future. We have a comprehensive FONOP program under which U.S. forces challenge excessive maritime claims across the globe to demonstrate our commitment to uphold the rights, freedoms, and lawful uses of the sea and airspace guaranteed to all nations under international law. FONOPs are designated to comply with international law and not threaten the lawful security interest of coastal States.⁴²

FONOPs are a critical component of United States strategy in the South China Sea and should continue, provided assets are available to do so. However, FONOPs should be an evolution that occurs more than three or four times a year. If the United States views Chinese (and other regional countries) maritime claims as excessive, the United States needs to utilize FONOPs as a signaling tool on a regular basis, making them the norm and not the exception.

United States Navy participation in bilateral and multilateral exercises is another critical messaging tool in the western Pacific region. In 2016, Carrier Strike Group THREE participated in exercises FOAL EAGLE with the Republic of Korea, BALIKATAN with the Republic of the Philippines, MALABAR with Japan and India, and culminated their deployment with the Rim of the Pacific exercise (RIMPAC). These exercises provide opportunities for the United States Navy to integrate with regional partners and allies, enhancing maritime security and disaster response interoperability. However, participation needs to be deliberate. In the case of exercise BALIKATAN, Carrier Strike Group THREE was a late addition and participation in the exercise was extremely limited. No prior planning occurred and integration was peripheral.

United States leadership also sees the messaging opportunity through enhancing America's partnership with Vietnam. In July, 2017, a United States Navy littoral combat ship and a salvage ship participated in integrated training with the Vietnamese Navy.⁴³

However, the United States Navy sent a much stronger message when the aircraft carrier USS CARL VINSON made port in Da Nang, Vietnam in early March, 2018, marking the first time an American aircraft carrier visited Vietnam since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. The Vietnamese response to the arrival of the USS CARL VINSON was overwhelmingly positive, claiming that more visits would help restrain China and their aggression in the South China Sea.⁴⁴ While the United States Navy should continue to visit the traditional port calls of Manila and Singapore, future aircraft carriers visits should include calls on Vietnam and Malaysia. This not only sends a message of continued American presence to China, but also reaffirms American commitment to allies and partners.

Thinking divergently, an alternative way for the United States Navy to counter China's strategy in the western Pacific is through cooperation with the PLA(N). As China tries to gain global recognition of their rising power, collaborating with China through various efforts not only satisfies their desire of recognition, but also could de-escalate tensions in the region. Conducting humanitarian assistance/disaster relief exercises with China positions them to react to a regional crisis as the lead responder. With the uptick of piracy along the Straits of Malacca, with 76 attacks during fiscal year 2017, which is along the route of China's proposed Belt and Road Initiative, the United States Navy could conduct joint security patrols with China. Finally, the United States invited China to the RIMPAC exercise for the first time in 2016, did so again for the 2018 RIMPAC, and should continue including China in future RIMPAC exercises. This will prevent China from feeling alienated from the rest of the Pacific region with the added benefit of potential de-escalation with its neighbors.

While the western Pacific is largely maritime in nature, there are opportunities for the United States Army to counter China's strategy as well. With its focus largely on the Korean peninsula, and right so, the United States Army's main effort should lie with partner and ally reassurance in the South China Sea region. The United States Army already participates in the annual exercise COBRA GOLD, held in Thailand. COBRA GOLD 2018 will see more than 30 countries participating with the United States Army bringing 6,800 soldiers.⁴⁵ Army leadership should build on this long-standing exercise and seek out opportunities to integrate with others in the region. There are future similar opportunities with the United States Army's PACIFIC PATHWAYS exercise series. Additionally, similar to the potential cooperation between China and the United States Navy during RIMPAC exercises, the United States Army could conduct similar integration efforts with the PLA.

Conclusion

The United States faces simultaneous strategic challenges throughout the world, ranging from nuclear tensions on the Korean peninsula, the 17-year long War on Terror, and Russian aggression in Eastern Europe. Over the past decade, China's actions in the western Pacific add an additional strategic dilemma for the United States. China's strategies in the East China Sea and the South China Sea are rooted in its history and the suffering endured at the hands of western powers and Japan during the Century of Humiliation. China takes every action with one objective in mind: to reestablish China as the center of the Pacific region as it rises to global power. While the desire to rise in power is not wrong, China's actions at the expense of its neighbors escalate tensions and raise the risk of miscalculation. Moreover, China's militarization of the South China Sea goes against international law and the rules-based liberal world order.

Ultimately, the American response to China's actions in the western Pacific requires a whole-of-government approach. Militarily, the United States must continue conducting operations in the western Pacific to protect vital national interests. FONOPs and exercise participation sends a clear message to China that the United States will maintain a continuous presence in the region. The United States must strengthen its treaty relationships with the Philippines and Thailand while enhancing the partnerships with Vietnam and Malaysia. Equally important, however, is the opportunity of improving America's relationship with China. Bilateral training and joint security patrols with China could give China the recognition they desire and simultaneously deescalate tension in the South China Sea. The actions taken by American leadership should strive to achieve regional stability, reassure American allies and partners, and protect freedom of navigation in the western Pacific. These pragmatic and non-provocative actions will enable the United States to peacefully support its allies and partners while checking the militarist actions of China in the region. To do more would invite armed conflict, to do less would be irresponsible. Global security and prosperity depend on successful accomplishment of this strategic approach.

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