

United States and China Relations in the South China Sea

by

Lieutenant Colonel Sherri LeVan
United States Air Force

Under the Direction of:
Colonel Nancy J. Grandy



United States Army War College
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Abstract

Chinese provocative actions in the South China Sea (SCS) have intensified U.S. and Chinese military interactions and any corresponding miscalculation could bring the two nations into direct conflict. This paper examines the tensions in this region that stem from China's rapid and large-scale land reclamation projects in the SCS and overlapping claims with U.S. allies on islands in the region. It analyzes U.S. national interests that are directly opposed to China's "Core Interests" in the SCS and that are driving diplomatic, economic and military relations. Conflicting national interests coupled with China's escalatory actions against U.S. allies and partners contributes to the current military tension between the two nations. The paper concludes that China's continued provocative actions in the SCS will be a recurring source of friction. Thus, the U.S. should maintain its presence to preserve regional security and stability. More important, the U.S. can dictate how and when to respond to Chinese provocations and the paper argues that now is the time for the U.S. to draw the proverbial line in China's man-made sand.

United States and China Relations in the South China Sea

Chinese provocative actions in the South China Sea (SCS) have intensified U.S. and Chinese military interactions and we risk any corresponding miscalculation bringing the two nations into direct conflict. This paper examines the tensions in this region that stem from China's rapid and large-scale land reclamation projects in the SCS and overlapping claims with U.S. allies in the region. U.S. ally tensions with China has cascaded into direct military tension between the U.S. and China on freedom of movement and access in the SCS where the international law allows.

This paper addresses each nation's inherently opposing national interests in the SCS and explains how those conflicting interests could lead to a miscalculation in military actions. China views their numerous SCS man-made features as a "core interest," a matter affecting both their territorial integrity and national sovereignty, while the U.S. views freedom of navigation in the SCS as paramount to preserving international laws, supporting allies and our economic interests. In analyzing the U.S. and China's national interests, this paper addresses several diplomatic, economic and military actions and reactions occurring between the two nations in the SCS. Incompatible national interests coupled with China's escalatory actions with our allies and partners are contributing to the current military tension between the two countries. Examination of the issues and actions of the two nations that concludes the U.S. should continue to deter China's actions in peacetime to preserve regional security and stability. Moving forward, China's actions in the SCS will continue to be a source of friction and requires the U.S. to maintain its presence, manage their assertiveness and not back down in the SCS as China continues to rise as a nation. The U.S. can dictate

how and when we interact with China, on what issues, and now is the time for the U.S. to draw the proverbial line in China's man-made sand.

South China Sea Background

The SCS is a body of water that covers approximately 1.4 million square miles in the Pacific Ocean.¹ It extends from the Straits of Malacca to the Strait of Taiwan, surrounded by eight sovereign states: the People's Republic of China, Taiwan, the Republic of the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, Brunei, Indonesia and Singapore. Over 500 million people live within 100 miles of the SCS. This large amount of individuals drives demand and competition for resources in the SCS from fisheries to fossil fuel.² The Energy Information Administration estimates there are about 12 billion barrels and 160 trillion cubic feet of proven and probable oil and natural gas reserves in the SCS, about a fifth residing in the SCS contested area in the northern portion of the Spratly Islands.³

Approximately fifty percent of global oil tanker shipments from the Middle East travel one of the world's busiest international sea lanes in the South China Sea connecting the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean.⁴ The South China Sea has half of the world's top ten shipping ports.⁵ The volume of shipping transiting the area has increased to keep pace with the region's population demand for goods and fuel. Approximately \$5.3 trillion in goods flow through international shipping lanes in the SCS annually and U.S. trade equates to approximately \$1.2 trillion of this total.⁶

Overlapping Claims of Sovereignty

The SCS encompasses hundreds of islands and features; the largest and most controversial areas in the region include the Spratly Islands, Paracel Islands, Pratas Islands, Macclesfield Bank and Scarborough Shoal. These areas have multiple,

overlapping country claims of sovereignty. The following is a brief list of the major contested areas and the countries involved:

- China and Vietnam have overlapping claims to the Paracel Islands (located in the SCS between Vietnam and China);
- China, Vietnam and Taiwan all claim the Spratly Islands in their entirety (situated in the central part of the SCS). The Philippines and Malaysia claim many of the islands. Brunei has no formal claim but has established a maritime zone;
- China, Taiwan and the Philippines (located in the northern part of the SCS) all claim the Scarborough Shoal and Macclesfield Bank (submerged reef at low tide);
- There are additional features in the SCS, rocks, shoals and reefs and some “near-surface features, which are also in dispute.”⁷

United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)

Under the 1982 UNCLOS, international maritime law governs a coastal state’s entitlements to a maritime zone.⁸ Part II of UNCLOS provides rules governing “coastal baselines, from which the seaward limits of maritime zones are measured.”⁹ Part II also defines the 12 nautical miles from the baseline extended outward as territorial sea, where states have sovereign rights.¹⁰ Part V of UNCLOS sets the rules associated to the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ), in which it provides each state with exclusive rights to resources within their EEZ.¹¹ It extends outward 200 nautical miles from a nation’s coast/baseline and may include a continental shelf that can extend the EEZ beyond the 200 nautical mile limit.¹² The following figure depicts the many overlapping claims in the SCS, particularly concerning the Spratly Islands.

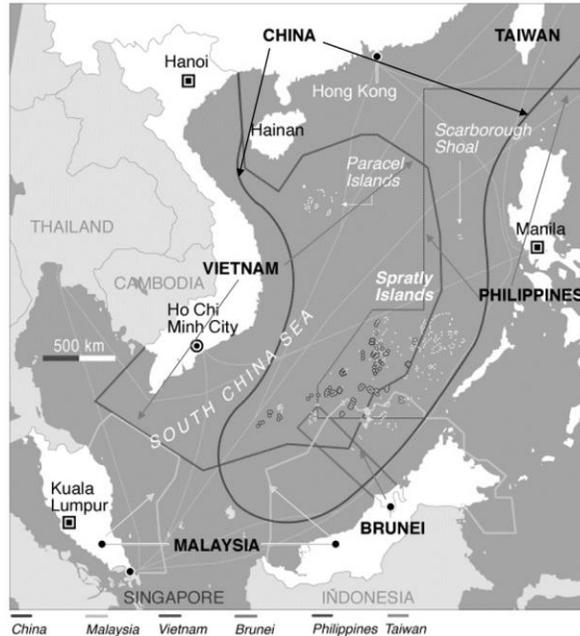


Figure 1. South China Sea Economic Exclusion Zones and Disputed Territories¹³

China's SCS Claims

Overlapping EEZs on the islands in the SCS is one of the primary reasons for maritime territory and resources disputes. China has solely occupied the Paracel Islands since 1974 when they pushed out South Vietnamese forces.¹⁴ China believes their historical claims trump international law. China's EEZ only covers part of the Paracel Islands according to the international law defined in UNCLOS, but they are claiming most of the South China Sea, as depicted in Figure 1 with the dark black line.

In 2009, China provided the United Nations (UN) Secretary General two Notes Verbales with objections to the Commission on the Limit of the Continental Shelf on actions taken by Vietnam and Malaysia.¹⁵ The notes included a map depicting nine dashes encompassing a large portion of the SCS. China asserts "indisputable sovereignty over the islands in the South China Sea and the adjacent waters and enjoys sovereign rights and jurisdiction over the relevant waters as well as the seabed and

subsoil thereof.”¹⁶ China has not further clarified its claims with UN. If you were to draw a line connecting each of the dashes, depicted by the dark line in Figure 1, it runs inside the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia and Vietnam’s EEZs.

China’s actions and words leave unclear the nature of their claim, including whether they consider all the maritime area located within their 9-Dash line their internal sovereign sea or if they are just claiming sovereignty over the land features. If China is claiming all the water as their sovereign territory, it goes against international law. According to UNCLOS, a state cannot unilaterally declare a boundary it must be an agreement between neighbors. China ratified UNCLOS III in 1996 but included declarations that in essence said the People’s Republic of China has sovereignty and jurisdiction over its EEZ and a foreign state must request prior approval to enter their territorial sea.¹⁷ Article 2 of China’s 1992 domestic law (Law of People’s Republic of China on the Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zone) affirms their sovereignty over the islands and included its territories, the Paracel and Spratly Islands, and internal waters along the baseline of their territorial sea facing land.¹⁸ Thus, China’s 9-Dash line and their domestic law put it at odds with international law and UNCLOS.

China’s Land Reclamation

China has initiated multiple massive land reclamation projects in the SCS, particularly in the Spratly Islands. Their assertiveness is alarming to their neighbors, including several U.S. allies. Per Admiral Harry Harris, Commander, U.S. Pacific Command, “While Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines and Taiwan have also conducted land reclamation in the South China Sea; their total--approximately 100 acres over 45 years--is dwarfed by the size, scope and scale of China’s massive buildup. In only 18

months, China has reclaimed almost 3,000 acres.”¹⁹ This rapid increase includes a 9,843 feet runway completed on the Fiery Cross Reef. Long enough to support the takeoff and landing of larger aircraft, such as a Chinese bomber. Vietnam, Malaysia and the Philippines also have runways, but they are from 2,000 feet to 4,484 feet long.²⁰ China’s rapid completion, the sheer size of construction on at least seven reefs, and the length of runways constructed has caused an upheaval in the SCS status quo.

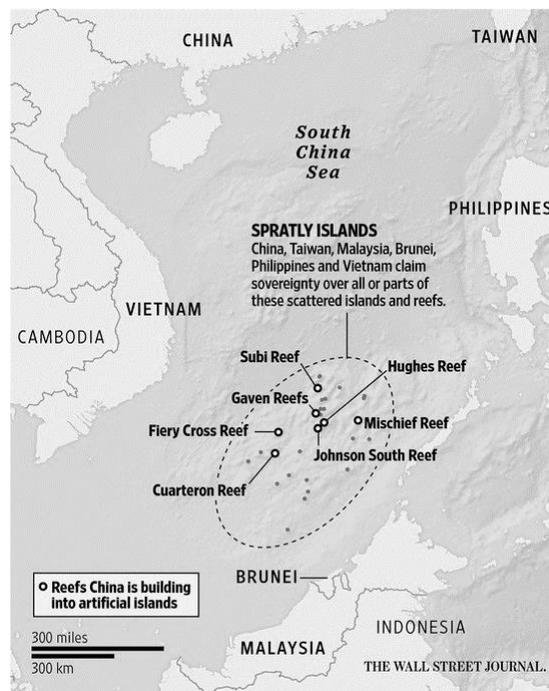


Figure 2. China’s Man-made Features²¹

The UNCLOS allows countries to construct artificial islands within their EEZ, but China is creating them outside their 200 nautical mile zone. Per UNCLOS Article 60(8), “Artificial islands, installations and structures do not possess the status of islands. They have no territorial sea of their own, and their presence does not affect the delimitation of the territorial sea, the exclusive economic zone or the continental shelf.”²² China’s artificial features do not qualify for territorial waters or an EEZ, just 500 meters around the feature for safety, UNCLOS Article 60(5).

The UNCLOS Article 58 preserves military freedom of navigation and overflight operations outside a nation's 12 nautical miles territorial sea, but in their maritime EEZ.²³ China continues to attempt to assert a larger protection, interpreting their EEZ having similar attributes as inside 12 nautical miles contesting military freedom of navigation and overflight in their EEZ. Additionally, China's artificial features in the Spratly Islands do not qualify for either a 12 nautical mile territorial sea or the EEZ, just the previous mentioned 500-meter safety zone.

China's Recent Aggressive SCS Actions

In the last three years, China has increased their assertive actions in the SCS. In 1999, the Philippines ran a vessel aground on the Scarborough Shoal. Filipino Marines maintain a presence on the ship to keep the Philippines claim to the Second Thomas Shoal. In early 2012, China engaged in a maritime standoff with the Philippines and in January 2013, the Philippines formally requested a UN tribunal against China under the Law of the Sea Convention. In March of 2014, Chinese vessels again blocked a resupply of the Philippines ship and the Marines.²⁴

The Philippines are not the only country encountering Chinese non-military ratcheting-up escalation tactics in the SCS. In May 2014, China placed a state-owned oil rig between Vietnam and the Paracels in Vietnam's EEZ, leading to a collision between Vietnamese and Chinese vessels that resulted in the death of Vietnamese sailors.²⁵ Vietnamese riots resulted in the evacuation of Chinese citizens and ultimately the removal of the oil rig.²⁶ The Chinese currently use coast guard or other state-controlled vessels, not their navy, to keep their actions below the threshold of military conflict. In addition to China's dangerous maritime intercepts, they continue to conduct air intercepts. Most recently, U.S. Navy and Air Force reconnaissance aircraft

experienced unprofessional intercepts by Chinese fighters in the SCS and East China Sea.²⁷ China's destabilizing actions coupled with the rapid reclamation of features in the SCS has made our treaty allies and partners nervous and concerned about China's real intentions in the region. In October 2015, the USS Lassen sailed close to China's artificial islands to assert U.S. vital interests, the reassurance of our allies and the freedom of access to the global commons allowed by international law.

United States National Strategy

The U.S. does not have a position on any of the territories disputed in the SCS, but there are numerous national and economic interests in the area. The 2014 National Security Strategy lists our enduring national interests as,

- 1) Security of the U.S., U.S. citizens, allies and partners,
- 2) Strong, innovative and growing U.S. economy in an open international economic system,
- 3) Respect for universal values, and
- 4) Rules-based international order advanced by U.S. leadership promoting peace, security and opportunity through stronger cooperation to meet global challenges.²⁸

The U.S. seeks to provide stability and security while promoting a rules-based regional order, both protecting our economic interests and reassuring our allies and partners.

The Asia-Pacific rebalance is critically important to our allies and partners in the region.

They are looking to the U.S. to provide stability and a counterbalance to a stronger more aggressive China. Current freedom of navigation and overflight operations in and over international waters in the SCS are military actions in alignment with our regional and national strategies. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, Secretary of State John Kerry and President Obama all recently reiterated, "The U.S. will fly, sail and operate

wherever international law allows.”²⁹ These military operations provide a visible symbol of our strength and commitment to our allies and partners and support for unfettered access to the global commons. The U.S. rebalance to the Asia-Pacific is a whole of government strategy with military actions providing security, stability and support to ongoing diplomatic and economic efforts.

Diplomacy

Early in the rebalance effort, the Department of State through U.S. Secretary of State Clinton, provided a position on the underlying strategy for the region that aligned with the President’s National Security Strategy:

- 1) Respect for international law;
- 2) Maintain freedom of navigation in maritime commons;
- 3) Encourage collaborative diplomatic process to resolve disputes without coercion;
- 4) The U.S. opposes use or threat of force by any party;
- 5) The U.S. remains neutral on sovereignty issues.³⁰

The Department of State’s strategy shaped our diplomacy in the region over the past five years. In May 2015, Assistant Secretary of State, Daniel Russel stated before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee,

At the heart of our rebalance is determination to ensure that the Asia-Pacific remains open, inclusive, and prosperous region guided by widely accepted rules and standards and adherence to international law. This is clearly in the interest of our own national security, as developments in twenty-first century Asia will reverberate throughout the world and here at home.³¹

Providing a stable region starts with strengthening cooperation among our allies in the region (Japan, the Philippines, Republic of Korea) while maintaining our alliance with Thailand. The U.S. is also focusing on strengthening relations with several partners in

the region. Recent U.S. diplomatic efforts with the Philippines culminated with the signing of an Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement and assistance in upgrading their maritime security capabilities. In 2014, the U.S. partially lifted a 40-year ban on arms sales of maritime items to help boost Vietnam's maritime defenses.³² In January 2015, the President released a U.S.-India Joint Strategic Vision and in October 2015, he met with the Indonesian President to forge a new partnership and strengthen our ties both politically and economically.³³

Asia-Pacific multilateral engagements are an important diplomatic effort concerning the rebalance to the region. The President during his November 2015 trip to the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum in Manila met with both Malaysia and Singapore leaders to discuss closer ties, rotational forces and engagements. Last year the U.S. committed \$119 million as part of an effort to expand maritime capacity building in the Asia and Pacific region and this fiscal year the President is seeking another \$140 million.³⁴ The President pledged our fiscal support during his attendance at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the East Asian Summit meetings. These multinational forums help facilitate cooperation with our allies and partners on issues such a defensive capacity building. All of the above actions link into our national interest of strengthening alliances and partnership in the SCS.

One of the most critical diplomatic engagements in the Asia-Pacific region is with China. President Obama, during China President Xi Jinping's visit in September 2015, reiterated what was in the National Security Strategy; the U.S. welcomes the "rise of a China that is peaceful, stable, prosperous, and responsible player in international affairs."³⁵ Due to China's large-scale and rapid growth, everyone benefits with their

collaboration on regional and international issues like terrorism, climate change, global health and humanitarian efforts. China must be a responsible stakeholder and “cannot effectively wield influence while selectively opting out of international norms.”³⁶

Economic

Why is the U.S. focusing a significant portion of its diplomatic efforts on the rebalance to the Asia-Pacific? Besides strengthening our alliances and partnership, the center for economic growth has shifted to the Asia-Pacific region. Southeast Asia is now an important driver of growth for our economy. According to the International Monetary Fund, Asia and the Pacific is still leading global growth, they accounted for nearly two-thirds of the world’s growth in 2014.³⁷ One of the significant diplomatic achievements in the past year was U.S. trade negotiations on the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). A benefit of TPP would be to help lower trade barriers on U.S. goods and services. The U.S. gained agreements with eleven countries in the Asia-Pacific region that accounts for forty-four percent of U.S. goods exported and forty-two percent of agriculture exported (2013).³⁸

The economies of the U.S. and China are heavily intertwined, with China owning a large portion of our debt and about half of our manufacturing. Trade with China in 2014 equated to \$123.7 billion in exports and \$466.8 billion in imports (rounded up).³⁹ China holds one-fifth of our debt at \$1.255 trillion in U.S. Treasury bills, bonds and notes.⁴⁰ Due to this interdependence, many analysts believe China would not use our debt against us because it would simultaneously hurt their economy.⁴¹ Overall instability in the SCS could harm the growing regional economy, and, in turn, harm U.S. national economic interests in that region.

Military (Security)

The military instrument of power provides the regional security and stability, deters adversaries and supports our diplomatic and economic interests. Throughout history, the U.S. has fielded a strong navy to defend our economic interests and alliances abroad. Security of our economic interests also entails being an advocate for freedom of the global commons, on the sea and in the air. The Department of Defense (DoD) is continuing to work and invest in military capabilities to deter aggression and assure allies and partners in this area, including new capabilities to counter an adversary's anti-access/aerial denial (A2/AD) attempts. In alignment with our National Security Strategy, the DoD Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy has three objectives:⁴²

- 1) Safeguard the freedom of the seas. The U.S. is committed to ensuring free and open maritime access to protect the stable economic order. Accomplished primarily through freedom of navigation operations (FONOP) by UNCLOS.
- 2) Deter conflict and coercion. Sustained through U.S. military presence in the region. U.S. defense posturing in the SCS has broadened and involves new or expanded military deployments in Australia, Singapore and the Philippines.⁴³
- 3) Promote adherence to international law and standards. The U.S. operates consistent with UNCLOS, although awaiting the legislative branch's decision to ratify it.

The U.S. uses FONOPs to maintain free passage and protect global commerce in the region. FONOP provides a visual symbol of our strength and the U.S. does not focus our operations on any one specific country. China's recent rapid buildup of submerged features and escalatory actions at sea against other claimants makes our allies and partners nervous about China's real intentions in the region. Due to the

increase in tensions in the SCS, FONOPs will continue to provide deterrence to escalatory actions, reassure allies and protect access to the global commons.

In addition to the issues with their man-made features in the SCS, the U.S. and China have different perspectives relating to military operations inside a country's EEZ. The U.S. stance is that there is nothing under UNCLOS that negates a nation from conducting military activities in an EEZ without prior notification. It is important to point out that China takes exception to U.S. reconnaissance activities in their EEZ and states it violates Chinese domestic law. China sees military vessels and aircraft operating in their EEZ as unlawful, where the U.S. views UNCLOS Article 58 and 87 as including all vessels and aircraft, including the military. Due to their position, China routinely intercepts our reconnaissance flights conducted in its EEZ and near their man-made features and these activities are becoming more dangerous and unprofessional.⁴⁴ Chinese intercepts of U.S. military operations are not new, but the way China is conducting them has changed, they are more aggressive.

The U.S. continues to invest in military-to-military relationships with China to reduce the potential for miscalculation and promote transparency. As an example, the Chinese participated for the first time in the U.S. Pacific Command's Ring of the Pacific exercise in 2014.⁴⁵ Along with keeping an open military dialogue with China, it is also important that the U.S. increases our allies and partner's defensive capabilities with funds, equipment and military-to-military engagements and exercises. Building up our allies and partner defensive capacities not only allows them to defend themselves but also enables them to take on greater responsibilities to provide sustaining regional stability and security.

China's Core Interests

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) must maintain their legitimacy with the people to ensure regime survival, which relates directly to China's continued rise and domestic stability. One primary tactic of the CCP in bolstering legitimacy is to channel and control nationalism. The CCP established a list of core interests to garner nationalism. In 2011, a Chinese White Paper "China's Peaceful Development" listed the following six core interests:

- 1) state sovereignty,
- 2) national security,
- 3) territorial integrity,
- 4) national reunification,
- 5) China's political system established by the Constitution and overall social stability, [and]
- 6) basic safeguards for ensuring sustainable economic and social development.⁴⁶

These core interests are areas China considers non-negotiable and would likely go to war to protect. Since China considers the SCS its territorial claim, although vague on the exact details, that territory would fall under China's core interests of both territorial integrity and state sovereignty as listed in the Chinese White Paper. These interests are the foundation for the CCP's international engagements as seen through their words and actions across all the instruments of statecraft.

Diplomacy

China sees their future relations with the U.S. as equals, part of a new great power relationship. Thus, China sees themselves as the preeminent power in Asia with their sphere of influence encompassing the SCS region. President Xi Jinping specified

numerous times China's long-term stance on non-interference in other country's internal issues and social systems. They do not want us exerting our influence in "their" region or interfering with their core interests in the SCS. China's stance of non-interference contrasts U.S. values of, "enduring commitment to the advancement of democracy and human rights and building new coalitions to combat corruption and to support open governments and open societies."⁴⁷

The CCP is also placing a lot of its focus domestically. Their rapid economic growth generated a substantial environmental upheaval in and around China's urban areas due to their simultaneous advance in the industrial and information age. This rapid industrialization produces significant health issues due to the poor air quality. President Xi Jinping and other CCP leaders are beginning to address these environmental issues and they recently signed a climate change deal at the UN Climate Change Conference.⁴⁸ Pollution and other environmental problems could eventually undermine their party's legitimacy.

Demographically, China has an aging population. Their one-child policy resulted in a disproportionate ratio of males to females that has led to a declining birthrate. China's population is now decreasing in size, which will, in turn, result in a reduction in their labor force.⁴⁹ Due to these domestic concerns, the CCP is probably using territory sovereignty disputes in the SCS to deflect attention and stoke nationalism.

Economics

China shifted its market reforms in 1978 from centrally planned to a market-based economy. They integrated their international trade and investments into the western-shaped international economic system. As a result, their economy has seen rapid economic growth. In 2001, the World Trade Organization incorporated China. Up

until last year, they were the largest growing economy (India just surpassed them) and they are currently the second largest economy.⁵⁰ China's growth also led to them using "punitive trade policies as instruments of coercion during past tensions [with neighbors], and could do so in future disputes."⁵¹

The World Bank states China is still a developing country and that rapid economic rise has brought on the challenges of inequality, rapid urbanization, environmental issues and demographic pressures.⁵² China needs to adjust their domestic policies to sustain their growth and China's current Five-Year Plan now focuses on domestic issues for their population rather than rapid economic growth.⁵³ Additionally, their economic growth also led to an increase in defense development for national security. China's military defense budget for security and deterrence is larger than Japan, South Korea and Taiwan's budgets combined. China's defense budget equaled \$145 billion in 2015.⁵⁴

Military (Security)

China invests a significant portion of its defense spending on internal security forces, developing and advancing a deep water navy, and asymmetric capabilities to offset stronger adversaries in order to protect their core economic and national interests. China has also consolidated its maritime law enforcement into the China Coast Guard with vessels painted very much like U.S. Coast Guard vessels.⁵⁵ They still use their state-controlled civilian "law enforcement" vessels to harass ships near disputed areas, with their navy in an "overwatch" capacity.⁵⁶ China's law enforcement vessels produce small, incremental progression of force that steadily increases China's control over a disputed area while avoiding an escalation that could lead to military conflict.

The People's Liberation Army-Navy (PLAN) leaders are displaying an aggressive assertiveness in the SCS and developing asymmetric niche capabilities with the potential to block the U.S. Navy from entering the SCS. These A2/AD capabilities decrease the military advantage gap between a larger force and a smaller one. Through dedicated modernization efforts, the PLAN now possesses more than 300 surface ships, submarines and patrol craft, the largest in Asia.⁵⁷ Although they are the largest navy in the region, Robert Kaplan states China is still an insecure sea power, in thinking of the SCS as its territory (their first island chain). This philosophy closely resembles early 20th century U.S. naval strategists compared to the modern global view of protecting access to global commons.⁵⁸ If China can control the SCS with their man-made features and asymmetric aerial denial capabilities, it signals an unacceptable risk to any country if they interfere with what China considers its core interest and potentially upsets global commerce.

United States – China: Incompatible National Interests

Are current clashes between the U.S. and China in the SCS because both countries are pursuing conflicting national interests? The U.S. views the world through a very different lens than the Chinese. We value individual expression, freedom and quick, direct action with immediate results. The Chinese value community, asymmetric indirect plans and think in decades, not days. Each country's values form their national (core) interests. It is these different views and interests that may produce a miscalculation of the other country's actions.

Freedom of Navigation or Threatening Sovereignty

The U.S. views freedom of navigation as a vital national interest to maintain access to the global commons. There could be severe worldwide economic implications

if China claims ownership of the SCS by force and “impedes” the flow of commerce. The U.S. views China’s reclamation activity as a threat to freedom of navigation and a destabilizing action in the region among China’s neighbors.

China’s Views on U.S. FONOPs

The U.S. military presence in their EEZ is a threat to their national security and a breach of their sovereignty. They also have the perception that the U.S. now sees China as a competitor and has rebalanced after ten years in the Middle East as an excuse to contain their rise and provoke their neighbors to turn against them.⁵⁹ Additionally, expanding defense partnerships and postures with U.S. treaty allies and partners in the region has amplified China’s perception. China may feel boxed in, and they are reacting by ratcheting-up their escalation tactics in the SCS.

A Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman, Hua Chunying commented that China does not object to freedom of navigation in actual international shipping lanes, but objects to operations that threaten a nation’s “sovereignty under the pretense of freedom of navigation.”⁶⁰ Many Chinese do not understand U.S. intentions in the SCS. Acknowledging the SCS islands disputes have been going on for decades, so they are suspicious of current U.S. involvement. They see the rebalance to Asia as a response to and containment of a rising China and that the U.S. is stirring the pot in the SCS to justify the rebalance.

China views the U.S. as taking sides against China as we did not protest the Philippines, Taiwan or Vietnam when they fortified their outposts. The U.S. conducts FONOPs in and around those areas as well. China may see their land reclamation actions in the SCS as a natural territory expansion and are taking steps to protect their sovereignty and secure access to transportation routes. Aaron Friedberg stated it well,

“As they seek to assert themselves, rising powers are often drawn to challenge territorial boundaries, international institutions arrangements, and hierarchies of prestige that were put in place when they were relatively weak.”⁶¹ Aaron Friedberg’s statement could explain why China is now aggressively asserting themselves in the SCS.

Nationalism or China’s Monroe Doctrine

China’s actions in the SCS may be to provide better security for their people or just a natural step as a rising power, but it could also be the CCP inducing nationalism for their party. Leading up to the USS Lassen FONOP last year, there was a lot of anti-American rhetoric in the Chinese CCP-controlled media.⁶² The Chinese public’s opinion on why the U.S. military is involved in the SCS reflects their belief that we are concerned with our ally’s increased dependency on China as the primary regional trading partner. Coupled with their perception of internal U.S. democratic and economic difficulties, it leaves our military as the only remaining instrument of national power the U.S. can leverage over China.⁶³ On top of that, China sees the rebalance as increasing issues between China and their neighbors because they believe our allies are advancing their interests alongside the U.S. and thus increasing regional tensions.⁶⁴

In 2015, the Chinese military navigated a warship through U.S. territorial waters off the Aleutian Islands chain. The CCP media, along with PLAN actions, roused a nationalist fervor against America. Once we sailed the USS Lassen FONOP, the media attempted to settle down the anti-U.S. sentiment. In an article in *Foreign Affairs*, author Jeff Smith stated the CCP-controlled Chinese Global Times “urged restraint” after the U.S. FONOP “political show.”⁶⁵ It is actions and reactions like these that make one think that the CCP is just using the SCS to bolster and secure their parties legitimacy. The man-made features and issues of sovereignty in the SCS are something tangible that

the regime can use to increase nationalism. The growing nationalism in the SCS diverts the population's attention away from domestic issues and allows the CCP to maintain a positive party image.

A counter-argument is that it is not nationalism but similar to the U.S. Monroe Doctrine in the late 19th and early 20th century. James Holmes disagrees and stated in *The Diplomat* "Washington never asserted title to the Caribbean the way Beijing claims the South China Sea. Further, America never sought to restrict naval activities in its near seas, whereas China opposes such things as routine aircraft carrier operations."⁶⁶

Why the United States Must Maintain a Robust Deterrence

There is a lack of trust between China and the U.S. traces back to their opposing national interests. The U.S. views China's claims of sovereignty in the SCS as expansionist. The Chinese are anxious about U.S. intentions, even though we continue to communicate the rebalance to the region is not about containment. China pursues a more aggressive stance looking to garner greater respect for its international status, but we see that China reacts to a clear signal of strength. China does not understand their behavior is driving U.S. response and that we may misunderstand China due to their lack of transparency. In all this potential confusion of intentions and conflicting interests, it requires that both sides maintain an open dialogue and continue to look to collaborate in areas of mutual interest. This clash of national interests coupled with a lack of trust and transparency on China's regional motives is not going away. The U.S. needs to manage the tension in the SCS as our new "normal". We have reset the baseline to what our regional engagement with China look like as it pertains to the SCS. With this new baseline, how should the U.S. deter China's coercive actions against allies and partners in the region? Today's information age allows us to bring China's escalatory

and coercive actions into the global spotlight. The U.S. did just that with a recent Navy flight near China's man-made islands with a CNN reporter on board to document their actions. This allowed the U.S. to control the strategic narrative.

It is important to our allies that we bring China's actions into international awareness because absent U.S. actions, the effects in the region could be twofold. First, It would allow a stronger Chinese military to go unchecked leading to more brazen engagements in the SCS, and we would fail to reassure our allies. Secondly, if the international community tries to re-engage at a later date, the level of military engagement required could come at a significantly higher cost both financially and in lives lost. Admiral Harris, Commander U.S. Pacific Command warned, "I believe that China's actions to enforce its claims in the South China Sea could have far-reaching consequences for our security and economy, by disrupting the international rules and norms that have supported the global community for decades."⁶⁷

China's President Xi Jinping stated they do not plan on militarizing the Spratly Islands and are committed to peace and stability in the SCS.⁶⁸ However, we already see the first, contrary signs with the placement of surface-to-air missiles on Woody Island in the Paracels. It looks like it was only temporary or China was trying to gauge international reaction, but it demonstrates China's coercive actions against its neighbors, Vietnam and the Philippines.⁶⁹ Continuing to Highlight China's militarization of the islands in the international arena, coupled with forward U.S. presence and consistent security operations should help encourage China to balance their nationalist intentions against the risk of U.S. military engagement. One thing is certain; China will continue to escalate their tactics unless deterred. The U.S. should continue our

operations in the SCS consistently and as transparent as possible to decrease the chance of miscalculation.

Additionally, their man-made islands in the SCS along with their geopolitical aspiration would provide China a power projection platform for the People's Liberation Army (PLA) that would extend their A2/AD range and bring a larger portion of international maritime and airspace under the PLA's firing arcs. The U.S. has an obligation to maintain a strong deterrence posture in the region for this reason. In a period of shrinking budgets, the DoD must balance the cost of the current fight with the need to modernize weapons, invest in new technologies and reassess a cold war organizational structure to maintain our A2/AD advantage. Increasing our lethality range and survivability with new A2/AD platforms would provide the needed counter and mutually assured deterrence towards our adversaries. The testimony of Dr. Andrew Erickson before a hearing of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific stated it best; a new paradigm of great power relations between the U.S. and China is "competitive coexistence," we should not exacerbate the competitive aspects of our relationship nor shy away from them. Words matter and the U.S. need not fear this tension as it would "encourage Chinese testing and assertiveness."⁷⁰

Conclusion

The U.S. must continue to address challenges that erode our ability as a nation to project power; many of our national interests lay beyond our borders. Our vital national interests of freedom of movement in internationally recognized global commons and the security of our allies necessitates we maintain operations in the SCS. China's rapid expansion of features in the Spratly Islands and missile placement on Woody Island is most likely a preliminary step in China's larger A2/AD plan. The U.S. cannot

allow China to create an exclusion zone in the SCS. The U.S. consistent with U.S. strategy, resolve to maintain and increase the use of FONOPs and reconnaissance missions in the region among all nations as a visible reassurance to allies and partners and provide a balance to China's coercive actions. We need a whole of government approach to balancing the needs of the current fight with military modernization and technological advancements required for continued deterrence. It is equally important that we work alongside our allies and partners to reassure and increase their security cooperation capabilities through agreements, equipment and humanitarian, disaster and military exercises. A concerted effort by both our allies and Congress is necessary to prioritize and invest in these efforts.

It is essential the U.S. continues to leverage diplomacy to build trust because our engagements with China are multi-faceted. We share areas of cooperation economically and with issues such as climate change, piracy, terrorism and other transnational threats. These help balance our relationship when we enter into areas of competitive friction. It benefits the U.S. by maintaining an open dialogue with China diplomatically and militarily. As allies and partners continue to draw closer to the U.S., China must realize it is not in their best interest to disrupt global commerce in the SCS or begin a regional arms race with their neighbors. It is in our best interest to help China realize its policy choices of coercion and ignoring international law in the SCS does not shine a positive light on a rising nation that could provide regional security for its neighbors.

This newly forming multipolar landscape and the increasingly non-permissive nature of the global commons requires the use of all our instruments of statecraft to

maintain security and stability of the SCS. The U.S. may not be able to stop China's land reclamation, but along with our allies and partners, it is vital we continue to protect our interests and those of the global economic system. It is essential that the U.S. and China work cooperatively while managing their competitive differences to provide transparency and reduce tensions that could lead to direct military conflict.

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