

## **Beijing's Upper Hand in the South China Sea**

**Why Time Is Running Out to Secure U.S. Interests**

**By Gregory Poling**

Since the 1980s, the People's Liberation Army Navy has sought to be the dominant power in the South China Sea. China has not yet accomplished that goal, but it is much closer than Washington cares to admit. China's artificial island building and its expansion of military capabilities in the area, combined with a massive naval and air force modernization program, raise serious questions about the U.S. military's ability to maintain primacy in the area. Admiral Phil Davidson, then commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, testified before the Senate in 2018 that China "is now capable of controlling the South China Sea in all scenarios short of war with the United States." In reality, the balance has shifted even more than that. The truth is that the United States would likely have little choice but to cede the South China Sea in the opening stages of any conflict with China.

But China isn't looking for a fight with the U.S. Navy. Even if China won, the costs for Beijing would outweigh the benefits. What China really wants is to convince the rest of Asia that the contest for primacy is already over. The greatest danger for U.S. military power in the South China Sea is not China's preparations for war but its peacetime machinations. By using the China Coast Guard and maritime militia—state-funded and -controlled paramilitary forces that operate from fishing vessels—to steadily erode its neighbors' access to their own waters, China hollows out the value of the United States as a regional security provider.

U.S. "forward presence," the strategy of constantly having American forces deployed abroad to reassure allies and deter enemies, rests on the access provided by partners. In the South China Sea, that means Singapore and the Philippines. And those countries increasingly wonder what they're getting from the United States in exchange for that access. The U.S. Navy might be free to sail the South China Sea, but Southeast Asians are being excluded from their own waters by the constant harassment of Chinese forces during peacetime. The more Chinese pressure builds, the more support for the United States seems like a bad bet—one that benefits Washington but not its partners.

### **UPPER HAND**

If there were a military confrontation in the South China Sea, Chinese forces would have clear advantages, ones they have been building up for years. The United States might be able to neutralize the air and naval bases China built on artificial islands in the Spratlys, a disputed island chain. But the effort would be costly, time-consuming, and uncertain since U.S. forces are too far from the area and the military capability China has constructed on the islands have helped shift the balance of power in China's favor. The closest U.S. combat aircraft are based in Okinawa and Guam, 1,300 and 1,500 nautical miles from the Spratlys, respectively. China has four air bases in the South China Sea, not counting smaller installations or those along its coast. It could deploy combat aircraft to the islands for short tours of duty at the drop of a hat. Given its current force structure, China would have control over the airspace above the South China Sea during the early stages of any conflict. And its considerable advantage in missile forces would

turn the South China Sea into a shooting gallery. It would quickly become clear that the United States could not protect American naval warships operating in the area.

China's radar and signals intelligence capabilities in the islands are extensive and, most important, redundant. They couldn't be easily blinded by U.S. forces, which means China would see the United States coming. And thanks to their surface-to-air, antiship, jamming, and other weapons systems, the islands are more defensible than many believe.

Sheer size also presents complications: The Pearl Harbor naval base could fit inside the lagoon at Subi Reef, the second largest of China's bases in the Spratly Islands. Mischief Reef, its largest, is roughly the size of the I-495 Beltway around Washington, D.C. Plus, much of China's military infrastructure has been buried or hardened against attack. This combination of size and fortification means that neutralizing the bases could require hundreds of missiles. And U.S. Indo-Pacific Command doesn't have the ammunition to spare, especially when any U.S.-Chinese conflict is unlikely to be limited to the South China Sea. Anything thrown against the Spratlys would have to be taken away from the defense of Tokyo or Taipei. The math is already brutal and getting worse: the stronger China's position becomes, the harder it gets to imagine U.S. forces operating in the South China Sea during a conflict.

Neither side wants such a fight, but that doesn't make one impossible. U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense Ely Ratner and U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Jung Pak said last month that Washington is increasingly worried about a sharp uptick in unsafe intercepts of American and Australian military planes by People's Liberation Army aircraft over the South China Sea. A ship from China's navy came within 45 yards of hitting the USS *Decatur*, a guided missile destroyer, during a freedom of navigation operation in 2018. Chinese militia boats have behaved even more aggressively. Miscalculations are plausible. And although there are mechanisms to prevent incidents and de-escalate those that occur, Chinese ships rarely follow the bridge-to-bridge protocols that are intended to prevent misunderstandings at sea, and calls on military hotlines to de-escalate crises often go unanswered.

Another potential risk is that something could go wrong during one of the many occasions when Chinese boats play chicken with their counterparts from other countries in the region. In April 2020, a China Coast Guard vessel rammed and sank a Vietnamese fishing boat in the Paracels, another disputed island chain in the South China Sea. A ship that likely belonged to the Chinese maritime militia did the same to a Filipino fishing boat in October 2019, leaving the crew members to their fate until a passing Vietnamese boat rescued them. In many other cases, especially when Chinese ships harass Philippine government boats delivering supplies to that country's outposts in the Spratlys, collisions have been avoided by the narrowest margins. Given how many vessels China has deployed to its neighbors' waters and how aggressively the Chinese government encourages them to behave, a loss of life seems inevitable. Were that to involve the [Philippines](#), the United States might be called upon to respond under the U.S.-Philippine Mutual Defense Treaty. Failure to do so would only accelerate the expansion of Chinese control over the South China Sea. But armed intervention would probably require the United States to jump several rungs up the [escalation ladder](#), putting it closer to war with China. And if both sides felt compelled to posture rather than de-escalate, things could get out of hand. No matter how such a conflict ended, each would lose more than it gained.

## **BUYING TIME FOR VICTORY**

Besides a military conflict that would likely be lose-lose, there are two other possible outcomes. The first is the one that Beijing seeks and toward which the region is drifting. In this scenario, China's peacetime coercion would continue to raise the risks to neighbors undertaking normal activities in their own waters. It would become impossible to attract foreign investment in offshore oil and gas exploration and other commercial activity. Fishers would lose their livelihoods, either because the Chinese militia and coast guard make life too difficult or because overfishing and reef destruction wipe out stocks.

Most other claimants to the South China Sea would eventually hold their noses and take whatever deal Beijing puts on the table. The U.S.-Philippine alliance would likely end as Manila concluded that it provided little benefit while irritating Beijing. U.S. ability to project power in the South China Sea would steadily decline as China's grew. Other states would more aggressively assert their own excessive maritime claims, further undermining the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. This would start with bad actors such as Russia and Iran but would eventually spread as rule-abiding states saw themselves disadvantaged by the excessive claims of their neighbors. And China, confident in the United States' inexorable decline, would challenge other rules and institutions, especially in [Asia](#). The net effect would be a regional and global order that is less stable and much more threatening to the interests of the United States and its remaining allies.

A far preferable alternative outcome would secure U.S. interests at an acceptable cost by pushing China toward a compromise that its neighbors and the international community could live with. As U.S. officials have been saying since the 1990s, any agreement between the stakeholders must be consistent with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. That means China must recognize all the freedoms of the [seas](#): unimpeded navigation for commercial traffic, access for foreign navies, and resource rights for coastal states. And any such agreement between China and the other South China Sea claimants must be reached without force or coercion. Luckily, the convention provides plenty of opportunities for compromise if all sides are serious about it.

The details of the arrangements between China and its neighbors shouldn't matter to the [United States](#). The goal of U.S. policy should be to cajole China into seeking compromise and then support Washington's allies and partners in whatever they decide, so long as it is legal and peaceable. Doing so will require a years-long effort to impose costs on and shape incentives for China. The United States cannot do this alone: it must involve a coalition of Asian and European partners. That coalition must impose diplomatic and economic costs, as well as strengthen Southeast Asian military capabilities, to help deter outright aggression from China. Since 2016, Beijing has been running away with the game and has had little reason to want a deal. But that could change if a critical mass of states began treating China the way they do other bad actors—Russia, for instance. That would make it apparent that Beijing's policies in the South China Sea undermine its larger goals. It would signal that China can be a global leader or a regional bully, but not both.

There are no military solutions in the South China Sea, but American hard power will play an indispensable role in any successful strategy. A multilateral campaign to change Beijing's calculus through diplomatic, economic, and legal pressure will take years. And in the meantime, China's military power will continue to grow. Pressure on its neighbors will build. The only thing that will buy those countries the space and time they need to see through a long-term strategy is U.S. military support.

The United States and other security partners must continue to provide capacity-building assistance to the [region](#). But the most important role the U.S. military can play is direct deterrence on behalf of the Philippines, keeping U.S. forces close enough to credibly threaten China with retaliation should it use force against Manila. As Chinese strength grows, it will test the seams of the U.S.-Philippine alliance. And without access to rotate U.S. assets through the Philippines, the United States will find it increasingly difficult to credibly respond to provocations. For instance, if China opts to use force to remove the *Sierra Madre*, a grounded Philippine warship that Manila has turned into an outpost on Second Thomas Shoal in the Spratlys, U.S. power in Okinawa and Guam won't matter. The United States needs a small but capable force of air and missile assets in the Philippines, close enough to put Chinese surface ships at risk and to respond to small provocations before they escalate. Manila and Washington recently launched long-overdue efforts to modernize their alliance, but time is short.

The South China Sea isn't lost to the United States and its partners yet. No other government has endorsed China's interpretation of maritime law; no country has accepted Beijing's territorial claims. The United States is still the preferred security partner for most of the region. And the U.S.-Philippine alliance is still alive and overwhelmingly popular. There continues to be a path to secure U.S. national interests at an acceptable cost. It is narrower and more uncertain than it was a few years ago. But that should be cause for urgency, not resignation.

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