

TROUBLED WATERS

A South China Sea Change?

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As Chinese construction and militarization proceed apace, the United States and its allies are ramping up their activity in the South China Sea.

June 2018 may turn out to be a critical month for the Indo-Pacific. In addition to the upcoming U.S.-North Korea summit, this month has already seen the annual Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, where U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis, Japan's Defense Minister Itsunori Onodera, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and other dignitaries reiterated their shared commitment to the region. Modi, during his first Shangri-La speech on June 1, spoke of the need for a "free, open, inclusive" Indo-Pacific, a "rules-based order," equal and open access to resources and common spaces, and freedom of navigation. Secretary Mattis, for his part, emphasized that the Indo-Pacific was America's "priority theater," stating: "Make no mistake: America is in the Indo-Pacific to stay." Just a few days ahead of the summit, Mattis had even renamed the U.S. Pacific Command as the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, "in recognition of the increasing connectivity between the Indian and Pacific Oceans."

Mattis also used his Shangri-La speech to criticize China in no uncertain terms. He noted that China's policy in the South China Sea "stands in stark contrast to the openness our strategy promotes." A few days earlier, on May 28, Secretary Mattis had informed reporters that the United States will continue its policy of using naval exercises to send a message to Beijing: that the United States and its allies do not accept China's territorial claims in the South China Sea and will push back against China's militarization of the contested waters.

These comments from the U.S. Defense Secretary come just a few days after two U.S. warships sailed within 12 nautical miles of four artificial islands created by China in the disputed Paracel island chain, off Vietnam's eastern coast. They also come on the heels of Washington's decision to rescind an invitation to the Chinese military to participate in the RIMPAC exercises, the world's largest international maritime warfare exercises, which involve more than 20 countries from across the Pacific.

American grand strategy for Asia and the Pacific, since the end of the Second World War, has centered on creating an Asian diplomatic and security architecture that rests on American economic and military might, combined with a network of partners and allies across the region. The economic and military rise of China over the past two decades has posed an increasing challenge to this American preeminence.

Starting with the East and South China Sea, China's strategy has been to change the status quo gradually, building bases and ports and creating artificial islands to present the world with a new reality. At the same time Beijing claims its goals are peaceful and benevolent, encompassing activities like helping countries build highways and ports—even though both of these are dual-use and financed by high-interest loans that leave countries indebted to Beijing for decades.

In the past few months Washington has been steadily pushing back against Chinese expansionism. In April 2018, China conducted two days of naval drills in the South China Sea personally presided over by President Xi Jinping. According to reports, more than 10,000 military personnel participated in the drills and more than 48 naval vessels and 76 fighter jets were involved. American and Japanese reports suggest that in addition to fighter jets China also deployed anti-ship and anti-aircraft missiles to its three artificial islands in the South China Sea during these naval exercises.

Beijing has asserted that the deployment of these “necessary national defense facilities” had “nothing to do with militarization” and was within its rights. Yet as former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson stated in October 2017, China has consistently undermined “the international, rules-based order” by its “provocative actions” in the South China Sea that “directly challenge the international law and norms.”

Echoing those words this past week, Secretary Mattis stated that there is “a very steady drumbeat of freedom of navigation operations” in the South China Sea and “there is only one country that seems to take active steps to rebuff them or state their resentment of them.”

The U.S. strategy of pushback is being supported by its allies and partners in the region. With a population of more than one billion, India is the other country with sufficient manpower to match China’s. India has also consistently viewed China’s expanding influence with suspicion.

While the Indian Ocean region is critical to India, the country’s leadership is increasingly focused on the Pacific. In late May 2018, Indonesia and India signed an agreement whereby Indonesia has given India access to the strategically located island of Sabang, at the northern tip of Sumatra and less than 300 miles from the Strait of Malacca. India will invest in the dual-use port and economic zone of Sabang and build a hospital there. Indian naval ships and submarines will also visit the deep-water port.

In early May 2018, for the first time since World War II, India has decided to station fighter planes in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands with the aim to strengthen India’s hold over the crucial Malacca, Sunda, and Lombok Straits and the Straits of Ombai Wetar and the eastern Indian Ocean Region. The Indian Navy has positioned warships in the region and also deployed two floating docks to repair and refurbish warships.

Japan and the United Kingdom have also increased their visible presence and activities in the South China Sea. In June 2017, in another first since World War II, Japan’s largest warship, *Izumo*, conducted its maiden overseas deployment and sailed into the South China Sea to participate in the International Maritime Review held in Singapore. The *Izumo*’s three-month South China Sea cruise is part of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s military and diplomatic push against Chinese assertiveness.

The United Kingdom plans on deploying two brand new aircraft carriers, the HMS *Queen Elizabeth* and the HMS *Prince of Wales*, to the South China Sea for freedom of navigation exercises. According to Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, the first assignments of these two new

aircraft carriers will be to “vindicate our belief in the rules-based international system and in the freedom of navigation through those waterways which are absolutely vital for world trade.”

Australia, Canada, France, the Philippines, and Vietnam have also condemned China’s moves and recently deployed their naval assets in the South China Sea. On May 29, the Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte asserted that the Philippines had its own red lines in opposition to Beijing’s red lines, warning against any unilateral Chinese effort to mine the sea’s resources. If “anyone gets the natural resources in the Western Philippines Sea, South China Sea,” Duterte would be ready to “go to war,” according to his Foreign Minister Alan Peter Cayetano. Ever since President Duterte took power in June 2016, Manila has come under heavy criticism for taking a soft line towards China. But with increasing tensions in the South China Sea and rising Chinese militarization, it is not surprising that even Manila is changing its tune.

In April 2018, China unveiled a monument on Fiery Cross Reef on the Spratly Islands as a “message about China’s determination to protect its territory and maritime rights.” Over the past few years China has built artificial islands, attempted to establish a no-fly zone, and deployed anti-aircraft missiles to the South China Sea. The Chinese appear to be adopting the famous principle from the Melian Dialogue: “Right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.”

If the United States and its partners and allies around the world want to send a message, it needs to be in a language Beijing will understand. A steady drumbeat of warships, aircraft carriers, naval exercises, and drills is important to balance China’s militarization in the region. However, if the aim is to contain Chinese activity, then there must also be some mechanism to prevent China from establishing hegemony over the region by deploying nuclear-capable bombers, ballistic missile submarines, and nuclear missiles. The recent pushback in the South China Sea is a welcome development, but much more needs to be done to counter China’s actions—before it is too late.

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