The Enduring Challenge of the South China Sea

The situation is constantly changing, but the basic balance of power remains largely the same as it has since 2012.

By Steven Stashwick

The South China Sea has juxtaposed enduring regional rivalries and disputes with accelerating great power competition since at least 2012, when China seized the Scarborough Shoal. The following year, Beijing began building large artificial island bases in the Spratly Islands. This mix of dynamics has largely carried into 2019, and new developments promise that jockeying between competitors will persist, but no clear advantage has emerged. The United States continues to assert itself militarily, primarily in opposition to China's claims and activities, but its critical alliance with the Philippines may be coming under new strain. Extraregional powers such as the United Kingdom have pledged greater presence and involvement, but the capacity of some of these navies to have a significant effect in the region remains uncertain. Meanwhile, China has kept up a strong "gray zone" presence and continues to aggravate other regional claimants with its coast guard and paramilitary maritime militia units but has appeared militarily quiescent relative to some big moves last year.

This year started off with big questions about the future of the military alliance between the United States and the Philippines. In December, Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana directed his department to review the Mutual Defense Treaty between the two countries to determine whether it needed updating or was even relevant at all. U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo travelled to Manila in February following the Hanoi summit between U.S. President Donald Trump and North Korea's Kim Jong Un to reaffirm the United States' commitment to the Mutual Defense Treaty. He stated that any armed attack on Philippine forces, aircraft, or public vessels in the South China Sea would trigger U.S. defense obligations. While this largely restated existing treaty language, the United States' commitment to coming to the Philippines' aid against harassment by China's military, coast guard, and paramilitary forces has been ambiguous since China seized effective control over the Philippine-claimed Scarborough Shoal in 2012.

It was widely believed that the United States maintained that ambiguity about its obligations to defend Philippine forces in the South China Sea out of concern that the security guarantee might create a moral hazard that could encourage Philippine forces to escalate more quickly against Chinese units and possibly drag the United States into an unwanted confrontation with China.

After Pompeo's visit, however, Lorenzana appeared to flip his concerns: now the threat was not that the United States would fail to come to the Philippines' aid, but that the Philippines might end up in an unwanted war. Following a patrol over the South China Sea by U.S. B-52 bombers in March, Lorenzana warned that the United States' military engagement in the region meant it was more likely than the Philippines to become involved in an armed conflict. Calling the terms of the Mutual Defense Treaty ambiguous and vague even after Pompeo's reaffirmation, Lorenzana was worried the treaty meant that the Philippines would be obligated to provide support to the United States in a war it did not want any part of.

Malaysia, while not a formal ally, is another critical partner that the United States would need in the event of a clash with China. Yet Kuala Lumpur too may be increasingly equivocal about its relationship with the United States. In a wide-ranging interview in March, Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, said that he was concerned by recent unpredictability he perceived in the United States politically and that while he had serious political worries about China's authoritarian system and its efforts to gain influence, it was necessary for Malaysia to take advantage of the economic opportunities China offers.

Alliance politics aside, Lorenzana is correct insofar as the United States has kept up a robust military presence in the region.

Besides its regular presence and exercises in the South China Sea, and combined training exercises with Japan and the United Kingdom so far this year, the United States has also conducted two Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) against excessive Chinese maritime claims. In January, the destroyer McCampbell sailed within 12 nautical miles of the Paracel Islands without requesting prior permission as China requires, but the UN Law of the Sea prohibits. The Paracels are claimed by both China and Vietnam but are occupied by China. Woody Island, the largest of the Paracel group, is home to a large military base that has seen rotational deployments of combat aircraft, and both anti-air and anti-ship missiles. Then in February, the destroyers Preble and Spruance similarly challenged Chinese claims near Mischief Reef in the Spratly Islands.

Just beyond the South China Sea, the U.S. Navy has also made two high-profile transits through the Taiwan Strait this year already. In January, the destroyer McCampbell and the Walter S. Diehl, a civilian-crewed logistics ship, traversed the strait. The transit came just weeks after the U.S. Navy's top officer, Admiral John Richardson, met with his counterparts in Beijing to discuss ways to manage risk between the two navies and engage with each other more constructively. About a month later another destroyer-logistics vessel pair, the Stethem and the ammunition ship Cesar Chavez, made the transit.

As the United States has stepped up its presence in the South China Sea, other extraregional powers are expanding their operations there as well. France, the United Kingdom, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand have all conducted operations in the South China Sea over the past year.

The United Kingdom, in particular, has emphasized a resurgent interest in the region. In February, Britain's defense minister confirmed that its new aircraft carrier, the Queen Elizabeth,

would deploy to the South China Sea and that it would transit waters in dispute between China and other claimants. This announcement appeared to anger China. Phillip Hammond, the chancellor of the exchequer, was forced to cancel an impending trip to China to conduct crucial trade talks. While the U.K. has conducted several exercises with the United States in the South China Sea in the past year, the February announcement may have been more rhetoric than relevant, as the Queen Elizabeth is not expected to be ready to make its first operational deployment until 2021.

For its part, China is not backing down from robustly asserting civil jurisdiction over the South China Sea, claims rejected by an international arbitration court in 2016. In addition to its growing naval fleet, China also has the world's largest coast guard – one that boasts the largest vessels of any equivalent force in the region – as well as its maritime militia, a paramilitary shadow fleet of converted fishing vessels that harass other countries' fishermen while permitting Beijing relative deniability.

Peter Dutton, a professor at the U.S. Naval War College, recently explained that as large as China's fleets are, they are still not nearly numerous enough to exert effective peacetime control over the giant expanse of water that China claims jurisdiction over in the South China Sea, so its enforcement efforts are necessarily targeted. Vietnam may be the most aggressive in playing these odds and continues to send its fishing fleets into waters it claims in dispute with China. In early March, one of those fishing vessels was rammed by a Chinese coast guard vessels near the Paracel Islands. The boat capsized and sank, underscoring the lengths that China is willing to go to intimidate its maritime neighbors.

At the same time, China's military has been relatively restrained in the South China Sea in 2019 and avoided overtly antagonizing the United States. Last May, the United States claimed China had placed YJ-12 anti-ship cruise missiles on Subi, Fiery Cross, and Mischief Reefs in the Spratly Islands and subsequently demanded that China remove those missiles at a high-level U.S.-China Diplomatic and Security Dialogue in Washington. While it is unknown whether those missiles are still there, there is no public indication that China has further militarized its South China Sea islands or deployed any new weapons systems to its bases in the Spratly Islands since. The two FONOPs and Taiwan Strait transits the U.S. Navy has conducted this year have also been notably uneventful. While China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs denounced the transits and the U.S. ships were shadowed by PLA Navy vessels, none of the interactions were reported to be fraught or dangerous. This contrasts with a FONOP that the U.S. conducted last October, when the destroyer Decatur had a dangerous encounter with a Chinese warship that cut across the U.S. ship's bow, forcing it to take evasive measures to prevent a possible collision.

It's possible that China is only avoiding antagonizing the United States in the South China Sea while trade talks over tariffs and market barriers between the two countries continue. There are strong indications that the Trump administration's tariffs are hurting China's manufacturing sector and Beijing may not want South China Sea issues to complicate negotiations. It is also possible that irrespective of the trade talks, the United States' more robust military presence and procurement of new anti-ship and long-range precision strike weapons that appear aimed at South China Sea scenarios has convinced China not to encourage further regional military

balancing against it. Regardless, while the South China Sea in 2019 is shaping up to be relatively quiet between China and the United States, nothing that the U.S. or its partners are doing appear likely to abate China's nonmilitary harassment and intimidation of its smaller regional neighbors.

The Author

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