



Addressing PRC “Three Seas Forces” Land and Resource Reclamation Efforts in the Indo-Pacific

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NPS NRP Executive Summary

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Period of Performance: 10/30/2022 – 08/26/2023

Report Date: 03/06/2024 | Project Number: NPS-22-N095-A

Naval Postgraduate School, National Security Affairs (NSA)



NAVAL RESEARCH PROGRAM
NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL
MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

ADDRESSING PRC "THREE SEAS FORCES" LAND AND RESOURCE RECLAMATION EFFORTS IN THE INDO- PACIFIC

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Student Participation: No students participated in this research project.

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Project Summary

In the last decade, China has employed its Navy, Coast Guard, and Maritime Militia to strengthen its "sovereign claims" and extend its maritime presence and control in the Indo-Pacific. This project, led by experts on China and maritime Southeast Asia, examined the best ways to push back on Chinese efforts in these maritime disputes, with the aim of crafting a more sustainable strategy to incorporate partners and allies in pushing back on China and deterring further aggression. The main findings and recommendations include: 1) The United States faces significant challenges and constraints in its efforts to push back on China; 2) The U.S., together with its allies and partners, needs to be more proactive in preventing China from threatening U.S. interests and the regional order; 3) The U.S. should focus on building partner capacity and resilience to enable these countries to stand up to China on their own; 4) The U.S. Navy needs to think asymmetrically and creatively to combat this growing threat.

Keywords: *China, South China Sea, gray zone, deterrence, coercion, great power competition, allies, allies and partners, maritime security, territorial disputes, Asia, East Asia, Indo-Pacific, Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia, Taiwan, Indonesia, Free and Open Indo-Pacific*

Background

In the last decade, China has employed its Navy, Coast Guard, and Maritime Militia to strengthen its "sovereign claims" and extend its maritime presence and control in the Indo-Pacific. These activities have occurred in the East China Sea against Japan and in the South China Sea against several other claimants, most importantly including massive land reclamation activities. The U.S. government and U.S. Navy have tried to reassure allies and partners and conduct freedom of navigation operations in response, which have had mixed success in deterring and pushing back on China. In recent years, the U.S. military and U.S. Navy have intensified their focus on and preparation for a large-scale war with China over Taiwan and have devoted less attention to China's malign activities in the gray zones in the South China Sea. At the request of the Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Operations, Strategy, and Policy, this project focuses on the relatively neglected area of the South China Sea and offers recommendations for the U.S. Navy and U.S. government.

This project examined the best ways to push back on Chinese efforts in these maritime disputes, with the aim of crafting a more sustainable strategy to incorporate partners and allies in pushing back on China and deterring further aggression. The research team included expertise on China and maritime Southeast Asia. This research effort examined recent successes and failures of regional claimants in how they have dealt with Chinese aggression, both alone, and with U.S. support. In addition to drawing on official policy statements and documents, academic and think tank publications, and newspaper reports, this project benefitted tremendously from discussions with officials at Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, Office of the Secretary of Defense-Policy, the Office of Naval Intelligence, Indo-Pacific Command, Pacific Fleet, and the U.S. Coast Guard.



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This project offers conclusions and recommendations on how to best work closely with other regional allies and partners to craft a sustainable strategy to confront China and deter further aggression and gray zone coercion in the South China Sea. It also examined the types of cooperation most desired by our allies/partners and what would be seen as too provocative. Further, it examined which types of support are most likely to deter China.

Findings and Conclusions

The United States faces significant challenges and constraints in its efforts to push back on China. First, given the U.S. military and U.S. Navy’s focus on the potential for large-scale war over Taiwan, there is no real war plan for the South China Sea, and Indo-Pacific Command has not been given a requirement to develop a plan to counter gray zone operations in the South China Sea. The lack of requirements and authorities have contributed to a more reactive approach. Second, compared with China’s “Three Seas Forces,” the United States and U.S. Navy lack the resources to compete with what China can deploy. Third, there are significant differences between the U.S. and allies and partners in what actions most effectively deter China in the South China Sea. The U.S. usually defers to allies and partners as it wants them to be in the lead, but they are often unclear in what they want from the U.S., what they will provide, or how they will act in potential crisis situations. Allies and partners often want specific responses on how the U.S. will respond, but the U.S. usually prefers to maintain flexibility and freedom of action. All of this complicates coordination in how to respond to China’s malign activities, and even more in how to communicate to China that there is a clear and coordinated threat that is more likely to deter Chinese actions.

The United States and its allies and partners have mostly been reactive in the South China Sea and have only taken action or made threats after China has already changed the status quo through its malign activities. The U.S., together with its allies and partners, needs to be more proactive in preventing China from threatening U.S. interests and the regional order.

Given China’s coercive actions towards other claimants, there seems to be a greater willingness by these countries to push back on China, but they often lack the capabilities and capacity. The U.S. should focus on building partner capacity and resilience to enable these countries to stand up to China on their own. Such support would not only include sharing our assets to enable maritime domain awareness and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, but also help our allies and partners to develop their own capacity to combat China’s persistent coercion.

The U.S. Navy needs to think asymmetrically and creatively to combat this growing threat. Especially given U.S. resource constraints, trying to counter China symmetrically with equal presence is impossible. This requires more flexible thinking and a broader approach to leverage assistance from allies and partners, but also to explore the possibility of commercial companies, unmanned systems, and advanced technology to try to provide a more persistent presence in the South China Sea, which is more likely to prevent China from taking advantage of weaknesses. Much of the capabilities can be acquired or



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redirected at a relatively low cost, and resources will not be diverted away from preparation for a potential large-scale war with China over Taiwan.

Recommendations for Further Research

The following areas of future research will help deepen knowledge in how to best deter and push back on China’s malign activities in the gray zones, especially in the South China Sea.

Determine specific actions that we wish to deter or prevent in the South China Sea. To date, most statements from the U.S. government and U.S. Navy refer to opposing Chinese challenges to the Free and Open Indo-Pacific and opposing China’s challenges to the status quo. As most historical cases of effective deterrence include a clear statement of the actions that the adversary should not undertake, greater consideration and discussion of the specific actions that we wish to deter is necessary for stronger and more effective deterrence.

Conduct more research not only on how to better coordinate with our allies and partners, but also on how to build their resilience so they can stand up to China and deter Chinese challenges more effectively on their own. On the earlier recommendation of determining specific actions to deter, research needs to be conducted on the specific actions our allies and partners wish to deter as well, and then comparisons are necessary between U.S. priorities and priorities of allies and partners. To improve coordination with our allies and partners, research and discussions are needed both on what they would like the U.S. to do to respond to China and hopefully prevent China from taking coercive actions, but also on what activities from the United States would be seen as counterproductive or even provocative. With one of the main findings and recommendations being to enhance the resilience of our allies and partners, more specific discussions need to occur with our allies and partners about the best ways to do so.

Most research has understandably focused on deterrence failures and cases in which China successfully used malign activities and gray zone tactics to change the status quo in its favor, but more research is needed on cases of apparent successful deterrence of China. Starting under President Obama, the U.S. has been clear and forceful in trying to prevent China from doing land reclamation on Scarborough Shoal, which has arguably been a case of successful deterrence. More research is needed on this specific case and the elements that made it successful and other cases of apparent success, with attention paid to whether U.S. threats prevented China from taking such actions or if China was not interested in taking such actions at the time.

Even with a narrower conception of gray zones in the maritime domain that we use in this project, successful deterrence and pushing back on China requires a whole-of-government approach and more cooperation with other government agencies. Although this is a U.S. Navy project, more research is required on the role of the U.S. Coast Guard, both in undertaking actions itself in the South China Sea and in working with the coast guards of allies and partners to enhance their resilience and ability to push back on China by themselves.



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