

Confronting China's Maritime Expansion in the South China Sea

A Collective Action Problem

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A collective action problem prevents the United States and its ally and partners from effectively countering Beijing as China moves forward in the South China Sea. The United States is unable to provide sufficient, appropriate security goods that would enable the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia to work together with America to stop China's advance, bring Beijing to the negotiating table, and force China to abide by international law. On a positive note, these four countries have taken collective diplomatic action in leading the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2020 to recognize the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) as the basis for resolving disputes. US freedom of navigation (FON) and overflight operations over China's outposts in the South China Sea (SCS) have caused protests and made the US position clear. Washington continues to provide security assistance and cooperation to the four countries and hold multilateral joint exercises with their armed forces. However, China continues to advance in the SCS and erode US credibility. If the US were to adopt a strategy of targeted denial, America's credibility could rise and the four countries' rights restored. China could be compelled by US-led collective action to negotiate a solution to the impasse.

The Collective Action Problem

For more than a decade, China has vigorously staked a claim to most of the SCS as its sovereign territory, within the so-called "nine-dash line." The rising power has been encroaching on territory within the 200-mile exclusive economic zones (EEZ) of Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia; threatening force against US military intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) activities in China's EEZ; and protesting against US FON and overflight operations near People's Liberation Army (PLA) outposts well outside China's EEZ. In particular, Beijing has encroached by using China's powerful coast guard, armed fishing fleet and militias, backed by an even more powerful PLA Navy (PLAN). Together, these measures have methodically pushed back the weaker maritime forces of Vietnam and the Philippines from parts of their EEZs and challenged

those of Malaysia and Indonesia. In addition, China has constructed artificial islands and positioned PLAN and PLA Air Force (PLAAF) units and surface-to-air (SAM) and surface-to-surface missiles in the Spratly and Paracel Islands, thereby expanding the antiaccess, area denial (A2/AD) capability that threatens the US and its allies and partners in the SCS. For more than two decades, China has harassed US naval and air operations and, since 2015, has protested US overflight and freedom of navigation operations (FONOP) in the Spratly and Paracel Islands. Today, China's maritime expansion activities enable it to potentially interfere with oil and gas exploration, and its antiaccess/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities pose a challenge to the US Navy and Air Force operations and to maritime and air traffic. In sum, China poses a potential threat to trade flows, resource extraction, and military operations in a highly strategic body of water.

This article argues that a collective action problem impedes the United States and its allies and partners from effectively confronting China in the SCS.¹ The problem is that the United States, as a great power, can provide appropriate security goods for the four smaller regional states to block creeping maritime encroachment by China. However, the wider US grand strategy and US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) theater strategy hamper the provision of appropriate security goods to those allies and partners. US deterrence of aggression by China with escalation "off-ramps" in Northeast Asia prevents the adoption of a more assertive strategy that would include working alone or with allied and partner forces in denying China's advances in the SCS.² Instead, the United States has settled for FONOPs, overflight ops, and security assistance and cooperation, which have not deterred China from expansionist activities. The problem is that the United States acting unilaterally or with others in denying China's expansion against the four countries could lead to escalation and destabilize the entire Indo-Pacific theater. However, if Washington does not act more assertively, its allies and partners will increasingly question US credibility and become more susceptible to China's influence campaign.³

The second aspect of the collective action problem is that without sufficient supply of US security goods and a more assertive strategy, the four Southeast Asian states are too weak and divided in terms of interests, positioning, and capabilities to work together to stop encroachment. Vietnam has one of the strongest militaries in the region but has a land border and extensive trade ties with China and must counter expansion on its own, while exercising caution and confining interaction with US forces to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) exercises.⁴ Malaysia is further away than Vietnam but weaker militarily, has been seeking to cooperate with the United States and Vietnam in countering China in the Spratly Islands, but remains reluctant to expand its military partnership with the US be-

yond HA/DR and search and rescue (S&R) exercises. The Philippines is a US ally but is the weakest of the four militarily; the PLA has pushed back the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) in the Spratly Islands and consolidated control over Scarborough Shoal. To counter China, the AFP has sought to work with the United States in moving to a more assertive stance with enhanced security assistance and cooperation in preventing further expansion, but Pres. Rodrigo Duterte moved the country closer to China in 2016 and threatened to cut or reduce certain ties with the United States. Indonesia is strong militarily, furthest away from China geographically, and has been trying to stand up to Chinese forces' challenges in the North Natuna Sea (adjacent to the SCS) and around Natuna Island. However, Jakarta is not engaged in the Spratly Islands, has little incentive to lead the other three states in confronting China, and is nonaligned and the leader of the ASEAN, which means that it is limited in security cooperation activities with the United States.⁵ Cooperation and leadership by Indonesia and Vietnam could provide some capability to stand up to China, but both are reluctant to work too closely with Washington and are hundreds of miles away from each other.

If Southeast Asian countries are to stand up to China and help solve the collective action problem, they require stronger national leadership and will, as well as US commitment. In addition, they need more capable navies and coast guards as well as air forces and marines to deter aggression and deny expansion. For developing countries, the associated weapons systems are expensive to acquire and maintain and require constant training to operate and upgrade. Pro-army bias often stands in the way of maritime and air force development. Armies dominate in all four countries, with Vietnam's land border with China requiring a large and capable army and with the other three countries waging counterinsurgencies of varying intensity.

Concerning US allies, Japan has constitutional barriers that prevent it from even the most minimal actions in the SCS that could be interpreted as offensive. Australia has politico-economic constraints, as the decades' long beneficiary of massive mineral exports to China. Both countries cannot participate in overflight and FONOPs, much less denial operations.⁶ In sum, even if the United States took the lead in such operations, the four Southeast Asian states, Japan, and Australia would find it difficult to follow suit.

My argument that US power and influence in Southeast Asia are not enough to overcome the growing collective action problem in the SCS must be viewed in the context of East Asia expert David Shambaugh's analysis; ⁷ he asserts that China has not become hegemonic in Southeast Asia and that the United States has the advantage in soft power, foreign direct investment (with large US companies), naval power, and alliances and partnerships in the region. He points out that China

has the edge over the United States in proximity to Southeast Asia and in infrastructure development and lending. There is also considerable evidence that China tends to be heavy-handed, which has alienated several countries and their publics. Despite the remaining US advantages, most Southeast Asian countries—even partners and allies—now must hedge in their relations with the United States and a rising China, which makes collective action in the SCS increasingly difficult.

In contrast to my argument that China will be able to continue expanding in the SCS and make it increasingly difficult for the United States and the four Southeast Asian nations to stop, Michael Beckley, in a 2017 *International Security* article,⁸ asserts that China will be unable to dominate most of the SCS and exclude the United States and Southeast Asian countries from the area within the nine-dash line, including the sea lanes. He argues that the United States and its Southeast Asian partners can take collective action or act individually to deter China from using military force to gain control of most of the SCS. The armed forces of Southeast Asian countries have the defensive advantage, as they are closer to home than PLAN and PLAAF forces based on Hainan Island and the southern China mainland. Furthermore, the armed forces of Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Philippines have A2/AD capabilities. Most have SAMs and fighter aircraft armed with antiship missiles, as well as submarines and mobile antiship missiles and mines.⁹ With the United States as a partner, their advantage is potentially even greater.¹⁰ The flaw in Beckley's analysis is in his principal question—does China have the capability to take over Taiwan?¹¹ He fails to acknowledge that a creeping takeover of the SCS is much less difficult for China to achieve than a successful attack on Taiwan.¹² Southeast Asian countries can use their A2/AD capabilities to defeat a Chinese attack on their land masses, but they cannot use them to block China's expansion in the SCS. In addition, Beckley argues that Japan, India, and Australia as well as the United Kingdom and France could work with Southeast Asian countries and the United States to guarantee FON and overflight. However, these countries have not been willing to engage more assertively to stop or slow China's maritime advance. Finally, US overflight and FONOPs have only amounted to symbolic protests against expansion.

In a May 2020 article, Oriana Skylar Mastro assesses different scenarios for military and diplomatic actions by China and the United States in the SCS. She starts from the premise that Pres. Xi Jinping may escalate military activity in the SCS to divert attention from the aftereffects of the COVID-19 health and economic crisis. China could “intensify coercive strategies” that it has already been pursuing or “change the military balance of power” by deploying more forces and sophisticated weaponry to the SCS or “take military action” against the United States and its ally and partners, which could lead to conflict escalation. The United

States can respond by choosing “deterrence by punishment” through sanctions or proportionate military retaliation. Alternatively, it could choose “deterrence by denial” by thwarting China’s expansionist activities. Finally, Washington could “accommodate China’s objectives” and see the SCS become Beijing’s “lake.” Mastro sees deterrence by denial as the most effective option but doubts the willingness of Vietnam, Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia to risk their relations with China.¹³ I delve more deeply into deterrence by denial as an effective option and the collective action problem preventing the United States and the four Southeast Asian nations from pursuing this option.

The collective action problem in the SCS is more problematic than the one that has existed in NATO since its founding in 1949. In the beginning, the United States was willing to pay for the preponderance of inclusive public goods for “regional security through deterrence” against the Soviet Union.¹⁴ NATO member states were a relatively “privileged group,” and the issue of burden-sharing grew more contentious as US economic dominance declined and as West European states grew richer. In contrast, US efforts to provide collective security goods against communist expansion to poorer states through the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization, 1954–77, collapsed after the Vietnam War. The ASEAN rose in its ashes as an organization to resolve disputes among member states and not to provide collective security against a rising China in the SCS. Only Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia have the level of interest in the SCS to lead the way in ASEAN diplomatic collective action. Furthermore, US interests in denying China’s expansion in the SCS are not as great as those in deterring the Soviet Union in Europe. The result is a lack of appropriate collective security goods.

A Different Approach

I examine the collective action problem by synthesizing the results from field research and previous articles and the works of Shambaugh, Beckley, Mastro and others.¹⁵ First, I assess China’s motivations, strategy, and tactics and demonstrate how China is using carrots and sticks in moving forward in the region. Second, I appraise US grand strategy in the Indo-Pacific and focus on the shortcomings of Washington’s SCS strategy, FONOPs, and overflight operations that are not deterring China from methodical expansion. Third is an examination of the characteristics and weaknesses of each of the four Southeast Asian states and diverging strategies and capacities, as well as the gaps between them and the United States.¹⁶ Fourth is a synthesis of the two parts of the collective action problem, demonstrating the strategic mismatch that is not stopping China from inexorably achieving Beijing’s goal of taking over most of the SCS. Finally, I assess a denial strategy that might slow or even stop China’s expansion and meet American in-

terests and those of its allies and partners, as well different obstacles that stand in the way of such a strategy.

Besides collective action theory, my analysis draws on structural realism, which has been used to analyze China's changing behavior.¹⁷ I argue that, after two decades of a "peaceful rise" grand strategy and largely defensive posture in the SCS and East China Sea (ECS), a rapidly growing China had the power to switch to a methodical offensive strategy in 2009 and challenged Japan in the Senkaku Islands and Southeast Asian states in the SCS and US credibility (after the Iraq War and 2008 financial crisis had weakened US power) and stepped up its influence campaign.¹⁸ When China realized that Japan would defend the islands and the United States promised to come to Tokyo's defense if Japanese forces were attacked, Beijing did not escalate but continued to press China's claim with periodic military maneuvers. Instead, Beijing realized that China had greater power to challenge the weaker Southeast Asian states in the SCS and that the collective action problem limited the options of the United States and US allies and partners.¹⁹

What Is China Actually Doing in the SCS? Sticks and Carrots

For five decades, China has been working to control increasing parts of the SCS, but this campaign accelerated in the 2010s. In the 1970s and 1980s, China took over control of much of the Paracel Islands in the northern SCS and Johnson South Reef in the Spratly Islands in the southeast quadrant of the SCS, both in Vietnam's EEZ. In 2009, a rising China switched to a more muscular grand strategy and asserted its nine-dash-line claim partly in reaction to a deal between Vietnam and Malaysia that divided their EEZs and continental shelves. Since then, Beijing has been carrying out a strategy to eventually secure sovereign control of the SCS by working to control the Spratly Islands, extending China's A2/AD capabilities and pushing back the United States. By advancing while avoiding conflict, China has been moving toward gaining a dominant position in the SCS and diminishing the role of the United States. China could continue to expand its claims in the SCS and become a dominant power without threatening FON and overflight. This appears to be the course China's leaders have followed, with occasional outbursts of aggressive behavior.²⁰

Since 2001, when PLAAF fighter aircraft forced a US P-3 surveillance aircraft over international waters to land on Hainan Island, China has chipped away at US influence in the region, while only occasionally engaging in provocative actions. China is engaged in active defense of its interests and rejects US military activities near its coast and in its EEZ. In particular, China interprets UNCLOS to mean that ISR activities are "unlawful" within its EEZ and has taken measures against US electronic surveillance of the PLA's Southern Command and nuclear

submarines around Hainan Island.²¹ China's posture toward the United States became even more confrontational when Beijing switched to more assertive strategy and tactics. In 2009, PLAN, PLAAF, and paramilitary forces intercepted the USS *Impeccable* and attempted to sever its towed sonar array 125 kilometers (75 miles) off Hainan Island. This started regular harassment of US Navy vessels within China's EEZ. For instance, in 2014, PLAAF combat aircraft flew close to a US Navy P-8 surveillance aircraft within China's EEZ, approximately 200 kilometers (120 miles) off the Chinese coast. China could eventually impose an air defense identification zone (ADIZ) over part or most of the SCS, which would follow the ADIZ it declared in 2013 in the ECS. Evidence for this comes from warnings that have been given by the PLA against US military aircraft that have been flying over PLA outposts in the Spratly Islands.²²

China's leaders have viewed the US strategy in Asia with concern for years, especially with the US Department of Defense's 2010 Air-Sea Battle operational concept—renamed the Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons (JAM-GC) in 2015—including the option of air strikes over China's mainland to counter its A2/AD capabilities. In addition, Beijing has feared that the United States is pursuing a containment policy, starting with the 2011 “Rebalance to Asia,” which had to be thwarted. Also, Chinese leaders have suspected that Washington has been behind challenges to China launched by the Philippines, Vietnam, and Japan as part of a containment strategy.²³

In maneuvering to secure greater control over Beijing's interests in the SCS, China has used “gray zone” tactics, leading with its coast guard, militias, and armed fishing fleet, with the PLAN as a backup force against those of the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia.²⁴ This approach serves two purposes, enabling China to: (1) flood an area with many armed actors to stop economic activities of adversaries and make an armed response as difficult as possible and (2) claim that its forces are carrying out “domestic policing” actions within the nine-dash line and that retaliation by adversaries' navies are escalatory and warrant using the PLAN in “self-defense.” In particular, China's forces prevent Hanoi from operating in much of Vietnam's EEZ in the Paracel Islands and parts of the Spratly Islands. In addition, China has been harassing Vietnam-backed oil and gas exploration in the Spratly Islands with little resistance. In recent years, China has been pushing Philippine forces out of positions in the Spratly Islands and, since, 2012, blocking access to Scarborough Shoal in Manila's EEZ, as the PLA prepares to possibly establish a military base there. The PLAN and China Coast Guard (CCG) continue harassing access to the BRP *Sierra Madre*, an LST-542-class tank landing ship built for by the US Navy during World War II—now in possession of the Philippine Navy, the rusting hulk was deliberately run aground on Second Johnson Atoll

in Manila's EEZ and manned by Philippine Marines to assert Manila's sovereignty in the country's dispute with China over ownership of the Spratly Islands. In Malaysia's EEZ, China is challenging oil and gas exploration.

China continues to expand exploration activities in the SCS as part of its hunt for much-needed energy and is now receiving oil and gas from the SCS. Chinese experts estimate that there is five times more oil and gas in the SCS than US Energy Information Agency estimates.²⁵ The Chinese National Offshore Oil Company (CNOOC) has been exploring for oil and gas in the EEZs claimed by Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, which has caused concern in those countries. CNOOC has been working with Russian oil and gas companies as well as other multinational corporations. In addition, Chinese fishing vessels now operate throughout the SCS to meet the country's rising demand for protein, and Chinese authorities are concerned about overfishing and force Chinese fishermen from the EEZ around Hainan Island into the EEZs of the Philippines and Vietnam, which leads to confrontations.

From 2013 to 2018, Beijing undertook major island-building projects on seven outposts and constructed military bases on them, improving China's strategic position, installing missiles, building runways, and enhancing its A2/AD capabilities. China continues to put pressure on other Philippine and Vietnamese outposts in the Spratly Islands. Furthermore, China has annexed the seven outposts and the area within the nine-dash line as part of "Sansha County" of Hainan Province, even though the Spratly Islands are more than 700 miles south of Hainan Island. In recent years, China has sent its fishing fleet, backed by the CCG and PLAN, into Indonesia's EEZ in the North Natuna Sea (just south of the SCS) and around Natuna Island. Jakarta responded by sending the Indonesian Navy, which caused the fishing fleet and CCG to retreat, but both inevitably returned. The fact that China is willing to challenge Indonesia in the farthest reaches of the nine-dash line indicates Beijing's intentions to eventually control the entire sea.

In 2013, President Xi presented his "Chinese Dream," which brought a more robust use of sticks and carrots.²⁶ China is using carrots, including aid and investment, to win over ASEAN countries. The first breakthrough came when China provided aid, trade, and investment to Cambodia and Laos, which led Phnom Penh and Vientiane to break with the ASEAN consensus on a Code of Conduct for the SCS in 2012. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which offers infrastructure development projects and loans, is the most prominent carrot. Malaysia, Indonesia, and other ASEAN states have welcomed the BRI.²⁷ China has launched the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), rivaling the World Bank. All 10 ASEAN states, Britain, France, and other US allies have joined the AIIB. In addition, China has countered Japanese efforts to promote the Trans-

Pacific Partnership (abandoned by the United States in 2017) by pushing for the Regional Comprehensive Economic Program, which excludes the United States. Besides the examples of Cambodia and Laos, China's offer of loans, infrastructure development, and other goods helped to undermine the resolve of the Philippines to insist that China abide by the 2016 UNCLOS ruling and helped to influence President Duterte to move the Philippines closer to Beijing and away from Washington. Also, China's imports from Australia keep Canberra from taking a stronger stand on the SCS.

In conclusion, China could interrupt military and commercial traffic by the four countries in the SCS if it wished to do so but realizes that such action would bring escalation by the United States and the disruption of oil and gas imports from the Middle East. China's gray-zone actions are such that it can maintain its military bases in the Paracel and Spratly Islands and advance in the area and know that it will not incite US countermeasures or collective action with allies and partners to deny expansion. As Beijing moves to take control of the waters in and around the Spratly Islands in the center of the SCS, China strengthens its position to control the sea lanes. Also, the United States is not sufficiently challenging China as the latter influences the four countries to lean toward Beijing and eventually accept the nine-dash line, dismantle their outposts, and renounce their EEZs. China cannot stop the US military from ISR activity near Hainan Island and FONOPs and overflight ops but will continue to intensify the threat environment to create greater uncertainty. At issue is how to counteract China's strategy and tactics now before it pushes Southeast Asian countries and the United States back further and assumes a more dominant position in the SCS.

US Strategy and Collective Action Obstacles

US strategy in the Indo-Pacific has prioritized Northeast Asia and the defense of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan above commitments in Southeast Asia, except during the Vietnam War, 1964–73.²⁸ The US strategy is to be prepared to defeat China if it attacks Japan and Taiwan and North Korea if it invades South Korea. This will be accomplished through massive conventional forces backed by nuclear weapons, providing deterrence as well as off-ramps to prevent escalation. Therefore, the United States has based most of its forces in Northeast Asia to prepare for war there. In addition, the United States, as a large distant power, has problems with resource deployment and sustainment, strategy and tactics, and credibility in the Indo-Pacific. Beijing knows the US strategy and its shortcomings and has designed its approach to coerce and influence US allies and partners without causing the United States to flow forces from the homeland to the SCS and elsewhere in the region.

The US traditional reliance on a “hub and spoke” alliance structure has limited Washington’s ability to organize and activate collective security against a rising China in the SCS and ECS. In the latter area, the United States has left it up to Japan to deny a Chinese takeover of the Senkaku Islands, and US forces are only prepared to come to the defense of Japanese forces if China uses a clash in the islands to escalate into a wider war with the Japanese Self-Defense Force. In the SCS, the United States did not come to the defense of its ally, the Philippines, in 2012 when China took over Scarborough Shoal and is not prepared to defend its ally’s claims in the Spratly Islands. While the United States welcomed the UNCLOS decision, Washington continues to abide by the ruling that none of the features in the Spratlys and Scarborough Shoal qualify as islands and will not defend the Philippines there. The US failure to take more robust action to help its allies and partners deny China’s advances has weakened some countries’ faith in US credibility and allows for its competitor’s continued expansion.

In conclusion, China’s carrots and sticks and the US approach have eroded the latter’s credibility and could eventually cause some partners to bandwagon with China and submit to Beijing’s will. On a positive note, US Navy FONOPS demonstrate defense of international law principles, that the US Navy can sail where it wants, and that the prospect of the PLA interfering with naval and other maritime traffic in the SCS is still a remote possibility. The same applies to US military overflight operations and freedom of air travel. However, these operations have not stopped China’s methodical advances in the SCS. China continues to push forward, not recognizing the UNCLOS ruling, the ASEAN Code of Conduct, and related principles. Therefore, in the short to medium term, the United States will be able to defeat China if Beijing blocks the SCS or escalates to war, but ultimately the PLA could escalate and stop military and/or commercial traffic in the SCS and achieve Beijing’s larger strategic goal of dominating the region.

Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia and Collective Action

Each of these Southeast Asian states has different interests, politics, and relationships with the United States and China, varying positions in the SCS, and divergent capabilities that must be overcome to enable collective action.²⁹ They also require more capable navies, coast guards, and other forces, as well as effective ISR over the SCS, if they are to stand up to China and its diverse and powerful forces. However, there is a basis for collective action in which the United States could become more involved. Manila, Kuala Lumpur, and Hanoi share interests in the Spratlys and in preventing China from expelling them from their outposts and

EEZs. Vietnam and Malaysia already have developed diplomatic cooperation in dividing their EEZs between them and are expanding them to include their continental shelves. The four states interact diplomatically and militarily through the ASEAN and bilaterally and support the UNCLOS ruling on the illegality of the nine-dash line. At the June 2020 ASEAN Summit, Vietnam led the way in regenerating consensus among the 10 Southeast Asian states in a strong statement that “UNCLOS should be the basis of sovereign rights and entitlements in the SCS.”³⁰ Let us examine in greater detail each country’s interests and capabilities.

Vietnam

Vietnam is located in the northwestern SCS, bordering China, and has overlapping claims with China over the Paracel and Spratly Islands. The country has long featured a strong nationalist movement, especially with armed resistance against France, the United States, and China. In addition, Vietnam has experience in waging low-level conflict with China over the Paracel Islands and SCS, with outbreaks in 1974,³¹ 1979, 1988, and 2014.³² China’s unilateral season fishing ban (from May to August) around the waters of the Paracels and oil exploration and militarization of the SCS continue to be sources of friction. Shambaugh classifies Vietnam as a “balanced hedger.”³³ It defends its land boundary, maintains significant economic relations, and manages its long-running dispute over the Paracel and Spratly Islands with China, as well as fostering a growing strategic partnership with the United States. While Vietnamese favor the United States over China (80 percent to 15 percent according to a US source),³⁴ the ruling Communist Party of Vietnam is cognizant of the need to balance relations with both Washington and Beijing. Vietnam’s security strategy centers around the “three Nos”: no alliances, no foreign bases on its territory, and no reliance on any country to combat others. Consequently, there are currently limits to the strategic partnership with the United States, and Vietnam will have to continue to confront China in the Paracel and Spratlys largely on its own.³⁵ At the same time, Hanoi has been reaching out to the United States and other countries to seek security partnerships and diplomatic support in its struggle against China. In May 2016, Washington lifted the lethal weapons ban against Vietnam, signaling strategic commitment and opening the door for greater security assistance and cooperation and arms sales.³⁶ In addition, Vietnam has diversified its arms suppliers and recently made purchases from India, Spain, and Japan, moving away from heavy reliance on Russian equipment.

One of the Vietnam People’s Armed Forces’ priorities is to guarantee sovereignty and ensure it has the capabilities necessary to protect the nation’s interests and enforce laws in the maritime territory Hanoi claims, including its SCS EEZ

and 21 small features, with two airstrips and mobile missiles, which it occupies in the Spratly Islands. The country has a rising GDP and relatively high state capacity, exemplified by a history of popular mobilization to defeat invaders, which has enabled the regime to increase the defense budget and expand procurement for all three services and its coast guard.

Concerning maritime capabilities and the SCS, the Vietnam People's Navy has 26 ships, including six Kilo-class submarines, purchased from Russia, which it has been operating for more than five years, as well as two mobile antiship cruise missile batteries with a 200-mile range that it can use as a deterrent threat in a confrontation with China.³⁷ Vietnam has been building up its coast guard, and the United States has provided Vietnam with excess defense articles, including a decommissioned US Coast Guard cutter in 2016. This opens the way for US–Vietnam coast guard security cooperation, particularly in HA/DR exercises and perhaps S&R. Above all, Vietnam can use the cutter for the Ministry of National Defense mission in the Spratly Islands and perhaps in the Paracel Islands. In addition, Japan has provided six multirole maritime response vehicles worth 40 million USD.³⁸

Vietnam has enough capabilities to defend its mainland in case maritime conflict escalates to a wider war. Beckley estimates that the Vietnam Air Defense–Air Force (ADAF) SAMs, including the SPYDER from Israel and the S-300 from Russia, can take down PLAAF fighter aircraft over Vietnam's mainland, exacting heavy losses. While much of the ADAF's aircraft are approaching obsolescence and still suffer serious limitations in areas of command and control (C2), domain awareness, and airlift, the air force provides credible support role of land and naval forces. The ADAF has no rapid deployment role other than providing routine air defense and troop reinforcement to the Spratly Islands.³⁹ The United States is supplying the ADAF with T-6 trainer aircraft, which could develop into Vietnam's procurement of F-15Es or F-16s. At present, the ADAF is handicapped by pilots who are unable to fly in bad weather or at night.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, despite the ADAF's shortcomings, its SAMs remain capable of providing air superiority over its landmass.

In conclusion, Vietnam is acquiring the capabilities to defend its outposts and EEZ in the Spratly Islands but is limited to unilateral efforts in dealing with China's expansion. China has more maritime assets and is able to mostly control the Paracel Islands and continue challenging Vietnam in the Spratly Islands. Concerning the collective action problem, the United States is confined to security cooperation and assistance, diplomatic support, and HA/DR exercises with Vietnam. Southeast Asian states can only provide diplomatic support, as witnessed at the 2020 ASEAN Summit in Hanoi.

The Philippines

The Philippines is located in the northeast SCS, and its military installations at Subic Bay and Basa Air Base are 600 miles from China's on Hainan Island. The country has had an alliance with the United States for more than seven decades, which seemed to be strengthening at the time of the 2016 UNCLOS victory over China. However, in July 2016, President Duterte took office and immediately sought lucrative deals with a China that was offering economic carrots. As a result, the Philippines backed off from its UNCLOS triumph over China. In 2016, the Obama administration pressured Duterte to stop extrajudicial killings and the regime's other human rights abuses, which caused relations to fray. Duterte curtailed the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) in 2016 with the United States and threatened to cancel the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) in February 2020. In 2018, Shambaugh observed that the Philippines had become a "tilter" toward China because of President Duterte's actions.⁴¹ Until 2022, President Duterte will continue to be influenced by Beijing and protest against US human rights sanctions, and his hand-picked successor will probably continue to do so. The fact that the Philippines swings every six years or so from challenging China to appeasing Beijing is indicative of elite corruption and state weakness.⁴²

In contrast to Duterte, the AFP remains fully committed to maintaining the US alliance, resisting China's expansionist activities, and engaging in the EDCA to jointly develop bases. Ultimately, Duterte signed off on a limited implementation of the EDCA, which ensured joint construction of a few military bases and backed off terminating the VFA. In 2020, the defense and diplomatic establishment finally succeeded in pressuring Duterte to challenge China in the SCS instead of seeking deals.⁴³ Despite the Philippines' more assertive stance, the AFP will struggle against China's "salami-slicing" tactics in the SCS and remain dependent on the United States for defense. Given the political situation and Philippine weakness, Washington will be compelled to weigh its interests in the SCS and the value of its alliance with the Philippines against justly punishing the regime for human rights abuses.

Concerning the maritime and other capabilities necessary to confront China's encroachment against the Philippine's nine outposts and its EEZ and seizure of Scarborough Shoal, the AFP will be constrained by defense spending that is less than 5 billion USD per annum because of weak state capacity and inability to tax elites in addition to decades of dependence on the United States for defense. In addition, the Philippine Army remains dominant over the Navy and Air Force, and the AFP remains internally focused on counterinsurgency and HA/DR and requires US support to do both. Consequently, the Philippines has been slow to

develop its maritime and air forces and has no missile-armed ships or combat aircraft that can challenge China's forces.⁴⁴ The Philippines is developing its Coast Guard, which now has 24,000 personnel compared to the Navy with 16,000. However, the Philippine Coast Guard has no gray-zone tactics training to confront China's forces and cannot focus solely on the SCS, given the security challenges in the Philippine archipelago. The Navy has acquired new warships from the United States and has used them to make voyages in defense of the *Sierra Madre* on Pag-asa Island in the Spratly Islands. In case of conflict escalation with China, the Philippines does not have an air defense system like Vietnam's and will have to rely upon the United States.

The Philippines is struggling to defend itself and its EEZ and requires its US ally for defense of the homeland. The prospect of regaining its rights in Scarborough Shoal is remote, and standing its ground in the Spratlys is a struggle. If the United States were to adopt a more assertive strategy of denial, the Philippines might be able to take a stronger stand and regain its rights. Manila would be even stronger if Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia were to go beyond diplomatic support and provide military backing along with the United States.

Malaysia

Malaysia is located in the central and southern SCS and a thousand miles away from Hainan Island. For decades, Malaysia and Indonesia have cooperated in policing the Strait of Malacca, and Kuala Lumpur has a defense arrangement with the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and Singapore and has become a security partner with the United States. However, in 2018, Shambaugh characterized Malaysia as an "aligned accommodationist" with China, because Beijing had used aid, investment, and other incentives to influence the administration of Prime Minister Najib Razak.⁴⁵ His administration tried to suppress media attention regarding China's activities in Malaysia's waters. In 2018, former prime minister Mahathir Mohamed led a coalition that ended the six-decades-long reign of the National Party and formed a government that moved away from deals with China and toward the United States. In 2019, political instability developed, which weakened the government and its opposition to China's expansion. Political battles between government and opposition have made it difficult for Malaysia to take a strong stand on the SCS. In March 2020, Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin assumed office and continued Malaysia's peaceful diplomacy, calling for adherence to UNCLOS and a binding code of conduct for the SCS.⁴⁶

Since 2012, Chinese actions claiming sovereignty over Malaysia's EEZ have caused concern in Kuala Lumpur, especially among military leaders. There was also dismay due to China's hard line over the Malaysian Airlines MH370 disap-

pearance in March 2014. In contrast, cooperation between the Malaysian and US militaries grew in the search for the airliner. In addition, Chinese oil-and-gas exploration and outpost construction has been moving southwest in the Spratly Islands for years, conflicting with Malaysia's EEZ and energy exploitation plans. In 2014, China and CNOOC occupied Luconia Shoal in Malaysia's EEZ to stop Shell and other companies moving northward to explore for oil and gas. At the time, Kuala Lumpur announced that the nation's oil and gas resources constituted the red line that China should not cross. However, Malaysia has sought not to provoke Beijing and has not pushed China for acceptance of the Code of Conduct for the SCS. In 2020, Malaysia is using the UNCLOS SCS ruling to expand its continental shelf claim. Also, both Malaysia and Indonesia oppose US naval patrols in the Strait of Malacca due to the sensibilities of the local populations.

The Malaysian military is dominated by the army, and security forces are concerned with violent extremist organizations (VEO), transnational criminal organizations, and smuggling. Malaysia has been focused on fighting insurgencies, particularly against rebel groups in East Sabah, which regularly cross over from the Philippines. In contrast, the military does not pay as much attention to China, the SCS, or the Spratly Islands. Concerning maritime capabilities, Malaysia's navy is small and outdated,⁴⁷ and the coast guard has recently been strengthened with US and Japanese assistance. However, neither service is capable of patrolling the vast maritime EEZ that the country claims. The government has been increasing its defense budget and buying new equipment, but Kuala Lumpur takes care not to provoke concern in its neighbors: Indonesia and Singapore. Malaysia has established three outposts in the Spratlys and developed a marine corps and a naval base at Bintulu in Sarawak in response to the claims made in 2014 by China's PLAN on James Shoal in Malaysia's EEZ. Malaysian-US cooperation over the MH370 search created some basic interoperability with the US Navy's maritime and air reconnaissance forces. Malaysia relied heavily on US P-3s, P-8s, and satellite imagery. Since 2014, Malaysia has been improving its air defense weaknesses exposed in the MH370 disappearance and has been developing ISR capabilities as well as an electronic communications link between maritime and air. Exercises with US forces included a focus on developing amphibious capabilities, which led Malaysia to consider buying attack helicopters.

Kuala Lumpur will continue to challenge China in the SCS through diplomatic means and claiming more of Malaysia's continental shelf as its EEZ. It has improved its ISR to keep track of China's activities. However, Malaysia will not join the United States in denying Chinese expansion in the Spratly Islands, even though China has been intruding in Malaysia's EEZ for much of the past decade. In April 2020, US Navy ships and an Australian frigate intervened when Chinese

vessels were harassing an oil-and-gas exploration vessel in Malaysia's EEZ,⁴⁸ but the government looked upon a more assertive United States with anxiety, because escalation would be disruptive to the economy.

Indonesia

Southeast Asia's largest nation is leading in promoting an ASEAN "rules-based international order," independent of the United States and China, and Shambaugh calls nonaligned Indonesia an "outlier."⁴⁹ It is cool toward China for cultural reasons (due in part to public hostility toward the Chinese-Indonesian merchant class) but remains nonaligned and does not want an alliance with the United States—just a partnership. Indonesia's human rights abuses in the East Timor conflagration of 1999 caused a rift in the security partnership with Washington that is still being repaired. Nevertheless, Indonesia provides the United States more potential for defense engagement and strategic partnership than any other Southeast Asia, given the country's size, control of the Strait of Malacca, ASEAN leadership role, and the current development of its forces.

In 2016, Pres. Joko Widodo introduced the "maritime fulcrum" to strengthen both internal and external security, including Indonesia's EEZ, which extends into the Natuna Sea on the southern edge of the SCS. China's aggressive activities around Natuna Island led Jakarta to develop a strategy to defend Indonesian interests. Recently, Indonesia lodged its strongest protest against China and an incursion by the CCG, referencing the 2016 UNCLOS ruling in favor of the Philippines and against China's nine-dash line.

Concerning maritime capabilities, Indonesia has home-field advantage against China and the PLAN, as Indonesia's Natuna Island is more than a thousand miles away from Hainan Island and takes several days for PLAN ships to travel to the Natuna Sea.⁵⁰ Indonesia has two bases within 300 miles of the island and four bases within 500 miles. It has established new bases on Natuna itself and has stationed air and maritime forces there as a deterrent, but the base is not well-maintained. Jakarta has also constructed a base at Mempawah, which is less than 200 miles from Natuna. The Indonesian Navy sank a Chinese fishing vessel near Natuna in 2016, following through on warnings to respect the country's EEZ. However, China has not been deterred from pressuring Indonesia in the Natuna Sea.

Indonesia is developing its forces, including major weapons purchases for the Navy, which already has five submarines with 35 years' operational experience and antiship missiles.⁵¹ Indonesian Air Force (TNI-AU) engagement in the Natuna Sea will help provide ISR as well as deterrence with combat aircraft. The TNI-AU is expanding into an operationally coherent and sustainable force and

is building its air defenses.⁵² However, the TNI-AU must cover 2,500 miles from Sumatra to Irian Jaya (Papua) and has only one squadron each for Commands West, Central, and East.⁵³

Jakarta is mainly concerned with ASEAN solidarity and Indonesia's EEZ in the Natuna Sea as well as internal defense against VEOs and separatists. It is another country that could work with the United States to overcome the collective action problem and challenge Chinese entry into its EEZ and those of Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines. However, it will not join the United States in denying Chinese expansion in the Spratly Islands and elsewhere within the nine-dash line.

An Alternative Strategy: Targeted Denial

To effectively counter China's strategy and tactics, Washington could adopt a more assertive approach to selectively deny its competitor's moves. Such a change is in line with recent US elevation of China as a strategic threat that needs to be met.⁵⁴ The ends of a new strategy would be to deny China's forces in their efforts to pressure the ally and partners of the United States, take over more of their EEZs, and, most importantly, erode US credibility. From the start, the United States, its partners, and the Philippines would hold out the possibility of a negotiated settlement. The goal would be a binding SCS Code of Conduct, demarcation of EEZs in accordance with UNCLOS, and an end to the nine-dash line, as well as FON and overflight.

The ways would involve the US Navy, backed by the US Air Force, selectively countering China's aggressive maritime maneuvers by shadowing Chinese vessels and working with the navy and coast guard of its ally—the Philippines—to block attacks on Philippine fishing fleet, forces, and oil-and-gas research vessels and platforms, particularly around Pag-asa Island in the Spratlys and Reed Bank.⁵⁵ The US and the Philippine defense and foreign affairs establishment would have to convince President Duterte to agree to such actions, and lately they and public opinion have been causing him to back the navy and coast guard in taking a stronger stand. China could react in several ways: by protesting as it has with US FONOPs; by agreeing to pause activities and negotiate; or by retaliating and escalating in the SCS and elsewhere.⁵⁶ If this way fails to pause China's behavior and bring Beijing to the negotiating table, the next step would be for the US Navy to back the Philippines Navy and Coast Guard as they push back Chinese forces around Pag-asa and secure the area, ending Chinese pressure there. In addition, the United States could beach a decommissioned ship on Pag-asa to replace the *Sierra Madre*. To deter Chinese retaliation and escalation

in the Spratlys and the vicinity, the United States could place antiship missiles on nearby Palawan Island.

After advancing Philippine rights in the Spratlys, the ultimate step would be US support of Philippine forces as they take back rightful control of Scarborough Shoal, which could provoke China to escalate.⁵⁷ I propose these ways, because the Philippines has an alliance with the United States, and the Mutual Defense Treaty and the UNCLOS ruling provide a legal basis; whereas US partnerships with Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia do not. Supporting an ally—the Philippines—in accordance with treaty obligations would do the most to boost US credibility. Washington could also follow up on its effort to protect a Malaysian research vessel by intervening on behalf of other ones belonging to Vietnam and Malaysia, even if the two countries do not openly approve.

The means would be a sufficient number of US and Philippines navy and coast guard ships capable of intervening and blocking Chinese forces and backed by other surface ships, patrol boats, submarines, and aircraft. Philippine vessels would lead the way, backed by a US force. Targeted denial operations would require training and joint exercises, as well as improved ISR, communications, and interoperability. The United States would also boost air defenses on the Philippine mainland to protect against Chinese escalation. Finally, US and Philippine diplomats would have to work to gain and sustain approval at each step by the Philippine government and bring China to the negotiating table. Ultimately a maritime peacekeeping force might be required to police any agreement. The resource problem of a more assertive US strategy of targeted denial in the SCS would be the requirement to relocate ships and aircraft that are needed elsewhere.

Conclusion

The preceding analysis and evidence confirm that a collective action problem prevents the United States and its ally and partners from effectively countering China as it moves forward in the SCS. The United States is unable to provide sufficient, appropriate security goods in the SCS that would enable the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia to work together with America to stop China's advance, bring it to the negotiating table, and force Beijing to abide by international law. The primary reason is the divergent interests of the United States as a global power, which is concerned about FON and oversight and containing China, and the four Southeast Asian states, which are protecting their EEZs. The larger US Indo-Pacific strategy inhibits more authoritative action.

The secondary factor is the disparate foreign policies of the four Southeast Asian states and their leaders' susceptibility to China's use of carrots and sticks. "Free riding" on the US provision of security goods by its ally, the Philippines, has

left Manila defensively weak and susceptible to China's encroachment in the Philippines' EEZ. The other three countries have not gone beyond partnerships with the United States and are struggling with China on their own. Furthermore, the four Southeast Asian states require larger and more capable forces to stop China, maintain the status quo, and regain parts of the EEZs that they lost.

On a positive note, the four countries have taken collective diplomatic action in leading ASEAN in 2020 to recognize UNCLOS as the basis for resolving the SCS dispute. FONOPs and overflight operations over China's outposts in the SCS have caused protests and made the US position clear. The United States continues to provide security assistance and cooperation to the four countries and hold multilateral joint exercises with their armed forces. Despite this activity, China continues to advance in the SCS and erode US credibility. Therefore, the US strategy of protest has not deterred China and could require change to a strategy of targeted denial. If Washington were to adopt such a strategy, credibility could be restored and the four countries' rights upheld. China could be compelled by US-led collective action to negotiate a solution to the impasse in accordance with international law.

Structural realists predicted that a rising China would expand beyond its boundaries and seek regional hegemony, which could cause war. China has expanded, seeking to change the regional status quo, making sweeping claims based upon debatable historical evidence, and acting upon them by encroaching on the EEZs of four countries in defiance of international law. A stronger Japan and Taiwan, backed by the United States, have been able to thwart China's ambitions in Northeast Asia. However, China has been able to push forward against the weaker Southeast Asian countries where Washington has chosen not to guarantee their maritime security interests but protest against China based upon international law. China, as the weaker power, has been careful to act in such a way as to avoid bringing into these disputes the stronger status quo power—the United States—which could lead to escalation and war. If Washington was to carefully ratchet up its strategy from protest to targeted denial in alliance with the Philippines, China would probably not launch a war and could be brought to the negotiating table. However, any such calibrated actions are not without risk. Great-power competition in the Indo-Pacific between the United States and China is here to stay, and war is always possible in the future. ★

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Notes

1. Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965). The collective action problem refers to the better-endowed actors failing to provide the bulk of the collective goods to overcome the problem of some of the weaker ones “free riding.”

2. U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) Area of Responsibility strategy <https://www.pacom.mil/>: “In concert with other U.S. government agencies, USINDOPACOM protects and defends the territory of the US, its people, and its interests. With allies and partners, USINDOPACOM is committed to enhancing stability in the Asia-Pacific region by promoting security cooperation, encouraging peaceful development, responding to contingencies, deterring aggression, and, when necessary, fighting to win. This approach is based on partnership, presence, and military readiness.” The USINDOPACOM strategy in defense of Japan and Taiwan is to threaten defeat of Chinese forces, while offering off-ramps to prevent escalation. The same applies to the defense of South Korea from North Korea.

3. Interviews with US defense officials in Manila, Philippines; Hanoi, Vietnam; and Jakarta, Indonesia, June–July 2019.

4. Interviews with US defense officials in Hanoi, Vietnam, June 2019. Vietnam considers even search and rescue (S&R) exercises with the United States to be too provocative.

5. China was able to influence Cambodia and Laos, and they weakened the “ASEAN way” consensus on the SCS starting in 2012. At the 2020 ASEAN Summit in Hanoi, Vietnam and other states persuaded Cambodia and Laos to agree to the joint statement that UNCLOS should be the basis for resolving SCS disputes and that the nine-dash line was invalid.

6. Nicholas Huynh, “U.S. Navy, Royal Australian Navy team up in the South China Sea,” Commander, US Pacific Fleet, 21 April 2020, <https://www.Cpf.navy.mil>. Recently, the Royal Australian Navy joined the US Navy in shadowing Chinese “research vessels” that have been harassing Southeast Asian research and oil exploration craft, which is a step beyond FONOPS and closer to a denial approach.

7. David Shambaugh, “U.S.-China Rivalry in Southeast Asia,” *International Security* 42, no. 4 (Spring 2018): 85–127. He finds that Brunei tilts more toward China, as they are jointly developing energy resources. Malaysia was tilting toward China under former Prime Minister Najib Razak, but his successor, Mahathir Mohamed, moved the country away from Beijing’s influence. Thailand was an “aligned accommodationist” with China until the Trump administration lifted sanctions in 2017 and renewed alliance commitments.

8. Michael Beckley, “The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia,” *International Security* 42, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 78–119. He observes that China could dominate the northeast SCS near the Philippines (e.g., Scarborough Shoal) with its air and maritime forces.

9. Beckley, “The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia,” 99. The Group of Five are Malaysia, Singapore, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand.

10. Beckley, “The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia,” 100. US Navy carriers plus air bases in Guam and the Marianas provide the United States with massive airpower to deter China from attacking US installations and allies such as Japan. In addition, Beckley asserts that the United States has contingency access at 100 airfields in five Southeast Asian states. He estimates that one USAF wing could destroy half of the PLAAF’s strike aircraft in three weeks, and two wings could do so in six days. With no air cover, the United States could destroy the PLAN. US sea-launched antiship cruise missiles have a 1,000-mile range, and USAF/US Navy air-launched antiship cruise missiles have a 570-mile range that would attack the PLAN. Finally, US

Navy submarines can outlast their PLAN counterparts, and the United States has the upper hand in antisubmarine warfare.

11. Beckley, "The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia," 101. Taiwan has the A2/AD capabilities that deter a Chinese invasion and estimates that the PLA faces an offense-defense ratio of 50:1 concerning the precision guided munitions needed to prevail against the United States and its allies and partners. Concerning the PLAAF taking out missile sites, Beckley points out that the USAF failed in attempting to take out missiles in Iraq in 1991 and 2003 and Yugoslavia in 1999. Finally, China has a slowing economy and homeland security concerns that could hamper or end its SCS campaign.

12. However, like Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia in the Spratly Islands, Taiwan does not have the ability to stop China's creeping expansion in the SCS that could eventually lead to a PLA takeover of Taipei's Itu Abu outpost.

13. Oriana Skylar Mastro, "Military Confrontation in the South China Sea," Council on Foreign Relations, 21 May 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/>. Mastro concludes by recommending the following for the United States: (1) increase the tempo of military operations with its allies and by greater use of the USAF and send ships to patrol the EEZs and prevent takeover of Scarborough Shoal; (2) respond immediately and proportionately to each aggressive act; (3) improve the quality of partner ISR; (4) couple escalation with a proposal for a way out of the ensuing crisis; (5) promote a binding code of conduct for the SCS; and (6) appoint a special envoy.

14. John R. Oneal and Mark A. Elrod, "NATO burden sharing and the forces of change," *International Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (1989): 435–56.

15. Interviews with Vietnamese, Filipino, Indonesian, and US officials and security experts, June–July 2019.

16. In addition, China is encroaching on the EEZ of the Sultanate of Brunei, which could qualify it for inclusion in this analysis, but the latter has acquiesced to China's actions and has not sought US security assistance.

17. John J. Mearsheimer, "China's Unpeaceful Rise," *Current History* 105, no. 690 (2006): 160–62.

18. Zhang Baohui, "Xi Jin Ping, 'Pragmatic' Offensive Realism and China's Rise," *Global Asia* 9, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 71–79. See also Dingding Chen and Xiaoyu Pu, "Correspondence: Debating China's Assertiveness," *International Security* 38, no. 3 (Winter 2013/2014): 177–80.

19. Stephen F. Burgess, "The Changing Balance of Power in the Asia-Pacific Region and Optimum US Defense Strategy and USAF Strategic Posture" (Maxwell AFB, AL: USAF Institute of National Security Studies, US Air War College, December 2015). Based on research in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan, the report points out the change in China's strategy from defense of Hainan Island and other assets to "offensive assertiveness" in 2010 with the struggle over the Senkaku Islands with Japan and the rise to power of Pres. Xi Jinping in 2013. See also Chen and Pu, "Correspondence," 177–80.

20. Rockford Weitz, "Military Activities in an EEZ," in *Law of the Sea: A Policy Primer*, Tufts University, Fletcher Schools L.L.M. In International Law and Maritime Studies Program, 2018, Chapter 4, <https://sites.tufts.edu/>.

21. Andrew Erickson, "Make China Great Again: Xi's Truly Grand Strategy," *War on the Rocks*, 30 October 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/>. China may eventually want to conduct electronic surveillance off the coast of Guam or India, so its questionable claim of a 200-mile EEZ zone off Hainan Island may cause problems in the future.

22. Weitz, "Military Activities in an EEZ."

23. Peter Lee, "It's official: America has a China-containment policy," *Asia Times*, 17 June 2015.
24. Toshi Yoshihara, "The 1974 Paracels Sea Battle: A Campaign Appraisal," *Naval War College Review* 2, no. 6 (2016), <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/>. China began using gray-zone tactics involving paramilitary forces in the 1974 clash over Woody Island with the forces of South Vietnam (defunct in 1975).
25. The US Energy Intelligence Agency estimates that the South China Sea has about 11 billion barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas rated as proved or probable reserves. See Chris Horton, "China Zeroes in on Energy Potential of the South China Sea," *New York Times*, 28 October 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/>.
26. Erickson, "Make China Great Again."
27. Andrew Browne, "After Chinese Stock Plunge, a Hole Shows in Xi's 'China Dream,'" *Wall Street Journal*, 15 July 2015. While Beijing seems to be making major multilateral moves to gain influence in Asia, China has not always followed up on its pledges of aid. For example, China actually transferred only 6 percent of 66 billion USD in pledged aid to Pakistan from 2003 to 2011.
28. *US DOD Indo-Pacific Strategy*, 2018.
29. Shambaugh, "U.S.-China Rivalry in Southeast Asia," 85-127.
30. Jim Gomez, "ASEAN takes position vs China's vast historical sea claims," Associated Press, 27 June 2020.
31. Yoshihara, "The 1974 Paracels Sea Battle." The 1974 clash over Woody Island was between the forces of South Vietnam and China.
32. Jane Perlez, "China and Vietnam Point Fingers after Clash in South China Sea," *New York Times*, 28 May 2014. In 2014, Vietnam sent small boats to harass China's attempts to erect an oil rig in the Paracel Islands. Also, Vietnamese rioted against ethnic Chinese in the country.
33. Shambaugh, "U.S.-China Rivalry in Southeast Asia," 102.
34. US Embassy officials, Hanoi, Vietnam, interviewed 26 June 2019. The 2014 attempt by China to situate a giant oil rig in the Paracel Islands was met by violent protests in Vietnam and pushed Hanoi closer to the United States. Also, China's construction of seven military bases in the Spratly Islands also pushed Vietnam closer to Washington.
35. US Embassy officials, interview.
36. US Embassy officials, interview. The US programs of working with Vietnam and its Coast Guard in developing its force and the Air Defense and Air Force (ADAF) in developing its T-6 trainer force will be the keystones of the strategic partnership in the near future and need to be managed carefully. These programs are part of helping Vietnam move away from dependence on Russian weapons and China's influence and will bear fruit in the ongoing and future strategic partnership.
37. Beckley, "The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia," 100. Vietnam is acquiring the Russo-Indian Brahmos missiles with a 190-mile range and that fly at 2,300 miles per hour.
38. US Embassy official, Hanoi, Vietnam, interviewed 26 June 2019.
39. Beckley, "The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia," 100. The ADAF has 35 SU-30MK2V combat aircraft with Kh-31 antiship cruise missiles and 18 bases.
40. Mark Cozad and Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, "People's Liberation Army Air Force Operations over Water: Maintaining Relevance in China's Changing Security Environment," RAND Corporation, 2017, <https://www.rand.org/>. "Recent over-water flights have been termed as normal operations and part of the natural development of the Chinese military, but authoritative military commentary suggests that the utility of these flights extends beyond simply training

for maritime missions, as they are sometimes also intended to convey strategic signals to relevant countries during times of political tension with China.”

While the PLAAF has poor navigation skills over ocean and in bad weather, some PLAAF pilots and aircraft can fly at night, and the PLAAF can launch more than 1,000 fighter aircraft from nine bases in southern China that could eventually overwhelm the ADAF.

41. Shambaugh, “U.S.-China Rivalry in Southeast Asia,” 101.

42. Interviews with US defense officials in Manila, July 2019.

43. Richard Javad Heydarian, “Philippines challenging China in South China Sea,” *Asia Times*, 27 June 2020. The Philippines is attempting to open Reed Bank (between the Spratlys and Manila) to oil-and-gas prospecting without China’s participation or interference.

44. In 2014, the Philippines acquired KA/FA-50 light fighter aircraft from South Korea and rejuvenated the 5th Fighter Wing.

45. Shambaugh, “U.S.-China Rivalry in Southeast Asia,” 101.

46. Ivy Kinek and Chew Ping-Hoo, “Malaysia’s Rationale and Response to the South China Sea,” *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative Update*, 29 May 2020, <https://amti.csis.org/>.

47. Beckley, “The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia,” 104. The Malaysian Navy has two French submarines that it has maintained for years and is experienced in operating. In addition, it has 10 frigates and 12 patrol boats and Kh-31 antiship missiles. The Malaysian Air Force has eight airfields and 36 fourth-generation fighters, including 18 Su-30s.

48. Even though US and Australian navy ships backed Malaysia in April–May 2020, Malaysia still voiced concerns about great-power conflict and escalation. In addition, US Navy presence in the SCS and surrounding waters has increased. In May 2020, China ended its operation against oil exploration operations in Malaysia’s EEZ.

49. Shambaugh, “U.S.-China Rivalry in Southeast Asia,” 101.

50. Beckley, “The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia,” 103. At present, the PLAAF has only 13 tankers, 16 AWACS, and two aircraft carriers with 24 fighters, which means that it would struggle to sustain an attack to seize Natuna Island and fight off the Indonesian forces.

51. Beckley, “The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia,” 103. The Indonesian Navy also has 12 frigates, 20 corvettes, and 30 patrol boats.

52. Beckley, “The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia,” 103. The TNI-AU has 49 fourth-generation fighters, with 33 F-16s (and is acquiring 25 more), 11 Su-30s, and five Su-27s.

53. Interviews with US defense officials, Jakarta, July 2019. Also, TNI-AU pilots have difficulties flying in bad weather and at night.

54. “The United States Strategic Approach to the People’s Republic of China,” The White House, 26 May 2020. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

55. Pag-asa is the second-largest island in the Spratlys, the largest administered by the Philippines, and 280 miles west of Palawan Island.

56. Beckley, “The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia,” 101. The Spratly Islands are more than 700 miles from Hainan, and retaliation against hostile action would require 30 PLAAF fighters over the Spratly Islands at any one time—plus air refueling. Therefore, escalation could be difficult for China, leaving the PLAN and CCG alone to do so.

57. One US SCS expert that I interviewed in the Philippines in July 2019 recommended that the US Navy quarantine one of China’s militarized outposts in the Philippines EEZ in the Spratlys until Beijing agrees to negotiate. A more provocative suggestion was US Marines landing on an outpost and handing it over to Manila.

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