

A US Response to China's Aggression in the South China Sea and Overall Aim of Information Dominance

DR. JOHN HINCK

LT COL BRIAN ASHBURN, USAF

LT COL BRYAN McNAUGHTON, ALABAMA AIR NATIONAL GUARD

LT COL THOMAS HEIER, USAF

LT COL TIMOTHY LIEBOLD, USAF

LT COL ROBERT PEARCE, USAF

The *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* released by the United States Department of Defense in 2019 clearly affirmed “the enduring U.S. commitment to stability and prosperity in the region through the pursuit of preparedness, partnerships, and the promotion of a networked region.”¹ Yet, China has continued to make improvements to many islands within the South China Sea (SCS) Beijing claims as China’s sovereign territory without regard for overlapping claims and the exclusive economic zones of the other countries in the region.² China’s expansionist actions, combined with an uptick in Chinese naval activity and its ongoing militarization of the SCS, risk further escalation of tension within in the region.

The new United States Strategy for the Indo-Pacific, released in June 2020, indicated that:

The primary U.S. interests in the region are (in rough order of importance): protection of the United States against direct threats; maintenance of the security and strength of U.S. allies; continued access to an economically dynamic region; regional peace and stability; prevention of the spread of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons; human rights, freedom, and democracy; and a healthy natural environment.³

To pursue those six key interests, the following strategy is discussed:

Once the region has recovered from the effects of the coronavirus pandemic, the strong economic growth of recent decades will likely resume, and the region will remain largely open to outside trade and investment. Population growth will be moderate, causing limited stress on resources and governing capacity. China will remain the dominant economy and dominant military power in the region (other than the United States), with a GDP greater than the next six largest economies combined and annual military spending roughly equal to that of all the other

countries combined. China will also continue its efforts to take control over Taiwan, the South China Sea, and the Senkaku Islands. China's leader will try to achieve this without military conflict but will use force if they believe it is necessary. Meanwhile, Beijing will continue to infiltrate and subvert the political systems of countries in the Indo-Pacific and elsewhere in the world.⁴

What is not discussed in enough detail is a more focused, asymmetric strategy that 1) thwarts China's information dominance by stopping the use of military controlled assets in the SCS with actions that will "press on" amid China's threats and use of C4ISR and 2) combines cyber and precision strikes on China's key economic and informational capabilities. This recommendation is backed by J. Michael Dahm's analysis in his 2020 *Introduction to South China Sea Military Capability Studies*: "any challenger to Chinese military capabilities in the SCS must first account for and target the very core of the PLA's [People's Liberation Army] informationized warfare strategy—its information power."⁵

United States President Joseph R. Biden in his *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance (INSSG)* released in March 2021, highlights how China is rapidly becoming more assertive: "It is the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system."⁶ If China controls the SCS, then China will be able to potentially hold hostage more than 30 percent of world trade.⁷

This article lays out views relating to the operational environment and the desired end state (DES) in the SCS, and offers recommendations using elements of national power (diplomatic, information, military and economic) to confront China's destabilizing actions in the region, interrupting trade, threatening sovereignty of other nations around the SCS, and limiting United States commercial and military access to the region in accordance with the Trump Administration's *U.S. National Security Strategy* issued in 2017 and the Biden Administration's newly released *INSSG*.⁸ Most notable, though, this article makes a stronger argument for why the United States should focus more on China's aim of information dominance. Led by the United States, immediate, focused actions involving key regional partners are needed in the SCS to maintain freedom of the seas for all allies in and beyond the region in accordance with international law.

Operational Environment

The construct of political, military, economic, social, information, infrastructure, physical environment, time (PMESII-PT) is a holistic way to assess the current conditions in an operational environment (OE). The following paragraphs

briefly cover some of the more important current conditions in the OE of the SCS with some macro analysis of the Indo-Pacific region.

Political: Claims in the SCS are characterized by a significant divergence in the claimant's perceived territorial and maritime rights and the basis for those claims. China's expansive claims are based on questionable historical claims while the Philippines and other nations that border the SCS are based on international law.⁹ The official stance of the United States is that claims must be based on international law,¹⁰ although the United States has not yet signed the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS). The concerns over ratification are just as strong as the benefits:

The Convention violated U.S. sovereignty and gave too much power to Communist countries like the Soviet Union and the United States might have to surrender sovereignty to the International Seabed Authority. Ratifying the UNCLOS would bring substantial benefits such as the agreement would resolve many territorial disputes with other countries, encourage investors to take advantage of resources on the high seas and deep seabed, and allow the Navy easier access to foreign waters.¹¹

In 2016 an Arbitral Tribunal, established under the authority of the UNCLOS, determined China's claims are contrary with UNCLOS and without legal effect.¹² Beijing categorically rejected the Tribunal's decision, authority, and process, refusing to even participate in the tribunal and has since.¹³ China actions since the Tribunal has only increased tensions in the SCS as recently stated by Admiral Davidson, United States Navy Commander, United States Indo-Pacific Command during this 27 March 2019 testimony to Congress:

Through fear and economic pressure, Beijing is working to expand its form of Communist-Socialist ideology in order to bend, break, and replace the existing rules-based international order. In its place, Beijing seeks to create a new international order led by China and with "Chinese characteristics"—an outcome that displaces the stability and peace of the Indo-Pacific that has endured for over 70 years.

In April 2018, Beijing continued militarizing outposts by deploying advanced military systems that further enhance the PLA's power projection capabilities, including missiles and electronic jammers. On multiple occasions, Beijing has landed military transport aircraft on the Spratly Islands and long-range bombers on the Paracel Islands. Additionally, Chinese Coast Guard vessels now fall under the command of the Central Military Commission and regularly harass and intimidate fishing vessels from our treaty ally, the Philippines, operating near Scarborough Reef, as well as the fishing fleets of other regional nations.¹⁴

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) are, according to RAND senior political scientist Andrew Scobell, “wary of confronting China directly, either individually or collectively, because of a significant imbalance of power” and a lack of confidence in US support and willingness to uphold the rule of law.¹⁵

Military: China leads the Indo-Pacific regional arms race in quantity of weapons – along with recently built aircraft carriers, airpower, and an estimated 20 percent increase in militarization of ports and airfields in the SCS. Despite the larger quantity, their quality remains a question-mark. Chinese confidence remains circumspect, otherwise they would operate more aggressively.¹⁶ Philippine forces depend on support from allies as they are outmatched by Chinese military capabilities, particularly regarding long range missile capabilities by sea and air. American assets are limited in the region, but they can respond quickly with global reach capabilities.¹⁷ China’s strategic goals (sea dominance and power projection) have shaped the growing emphasis on the aircraft carrier, which is a strategic target for other countries.¹⁸ Chinese aircraft carriers project power and are a national symbol for Chinese pride. China is not alone in increasing military capabilities. Vietnam, Philippines, and Indonesia had corresponding increases in arms imports.¹⁹ As explained by Heigo Sato, a professor at Takushoku University in Tokyo, “The U.S. thinks that rather than deploying their own troops, they should export arms and enhance their allies’ military capabilities.”²⁰ More concerning is the way that China operates its coast guard as nonmilitary forces in the SCS to protect claims and fishing boats, particularly in the Whitsun Reef area. In reality, China is actually employing the People’s Armed Forces Maritime Militia, an armed fishing militia, and the well-trained Chinese Coast Guard to provide them a unique capability to operate in disputed areas while not crossing the line of offensive conflict.²¹ his tactic allows China an early information dominance in the SCS.

Economic: The region comprises at least 38 countries that share 44 percent of world surface area, 65 percent of world population, and account for 62 percent of world-GDP, and 46 percent of the merchandise trade worldwide.²² The region has numerous trade agreements, most importantly the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), the Regional Comprehensive Partnership (RCEP), the trilateral free trade agreement (FTA) between China, Japan, and South Korea, the United States, and the European Union FTA. Yet, most concerning are China’s aggressive economic actions described in *the National Security Strategy* issued in 2017 and *National Military Strategy* issued in 2018 that preclude open and stable free trade in the international system. Additionally,

China's growing middle class will have immense spending power. By 2025, it is estimated that

More people will migrate to China's cities for higher paying jobs. These working consumers, once the country's poorest, will steadily climb the income ladder, creating a new a massive middle class. This segment will comprise a staggering 520 million people – more than half of the expected urban population of China – with a combined total disposable income of 13.3 trillion renminbi (100,000 renminbi = \$40,000 in the U.S.).²³

Another line of thought is that economic opportunities are stagnating, especially for new college graduates, lower-middle class and below. Either analysis provides an opportunity to influence the economic situations.

Social: To secure China's future as a strong nation, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had to create a new culture that enabled the creation of a "new society, that is not only "Chinese" in name but also in essence."²⁴ China is a civilization state that foreigners labeled a nation-state as defined by western society. The Chinese culture's ability to absorb foreign ideas greatly enabled the CCP in creating an image as a unified but multi-ethnic nation. This created image laid a foundation to Sinicize content-less nationalism. In addition, the CCP developed and executed a patriotic education campaign that effectively replaced socialism with patriotism. Increased patriotism and nationalism have worked hand-in-hand to legitimize the rule of the CCP.²⁵ Often not considered in social analysis is how public opinion of China's growing middle class will matter in the SCS. In 2004, it was reported that China's middle class "exhibits a greater nascent liberalism than poorer classes"²⁶ that promotes greater emphasis on individual rights, democracy, and civil liberties. Yet more recent analysis in 2020 questions "how will a growing Chinese middle class impact global politics, when democracy is no longer the only way to achieve a stable middle-class lifestyle?"²⁷ While there is merit in both sentiments, it is clear that the social force matter in the region. For the past two decades, there has been continuous sparring online by Chinese, Filipino, and Vietnamese – lower class, middle class, and celebrities – over claims in the SCS.²⁸

Information: One of Beijing's goals for its island outposts in the SCS is to build an integrated system-of-systems to facilitate information superiority through command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities and nonmilitary information networks. A review of open-source material and commercial satellite imagery by a senior researcher at the Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Laboratory, found significant communication potential for China through undersea fiber-optic-cable, multi-band satellite

communications and high-frequency broadband arrays.²⁹ These combine to develop an integrated system of Chinese information superiority, allowing Beijing *de facto* control.

However, information operations are ill-defined in military publications in relation to China's focus on information dominance.³⁰

IW presents the Chinese with a potentially potent, if circumscribed, asymmetric weapon. Defined carefully, it could give the PLA a longer-range power projection capability against U.S. forces that its conventional forces cannot currently hope to match. In particular, I would argue that these weapons give the PLA a possible way to attack the Achilles' Heel of the advanced, informatized U.S. military: its information systems, especially those related to command and control and transportation. By attacking these targets, the Chinese could possibly degrade or delay U.S. force mobilization in a time dependent scenario, such as Taiwan, and do so with a measure of plausible deniability.³¹

Consequently, one of NORAD four strategic principles is information dominance as a defensive measure for the United States.³² This is somewhat problematic because neither USNORTHCOM nor USINDOPACOM are directly confronting China's focus on information operations, especially as an element of asymmetric warfare, and the use of military owned assets in the SCS. Admiral Davidson, Commander of United States Indo-Pacific Command, is his testimony to Full House Armed Services Committee Hearing: "National Security Challenges and U.S. Military Activities in the Indo-Pacific," on Wednesday, 10 March 2021, believed that:

...absent a convincing deterrent, China will be emboldened to continue to take action to supplant the established rules-based international order, and the values represented in our vision for a free and open Indo Pacific," he said. "Our deterrence posture in the Indo Pacific must demonstrate the capability, the capacity and the will to convince Beijing unequivocally, that the costs of achieving their objectives by the use of military force are simply too high."³³

Infrastructure: China's actions potentially threaten the infrastructure of all nations that border the SCS. The improvement to the island features in the SCS were initially all military in nature; however, commercial infrastructure development is ongoing to support tourism, oil and gas exploration, and the fishing industry.³⁴ China's aggression threatens allies who depend on unfettered access to regional waterways and shipping lanes. China's action in the SCS can have ripple effects on other nations. For example, China's actions could disrupt Philippine commercial shipping that sustains the abundant commercial bus, airline, ferry, and taxi services, or disrupt power on the 95 percent of the Filipino population

who are dependent on electricity and the growing 60 percent who have access to the internet.³⁵ The key military infrastructures are an array of interisland communications, high-frequency communications, electronic warfare and signals intelligence, sub-reef counterstealth radar, and undersea fiber-optic cable and satellite communications.³⁶

Physical: The SCS is the western Pacific's largest marginal sea occupying an area of slightly more than 1.4 million square miles, including the Luzon Strait and Strait of Malacca. Although China claims the Taiwan Strait as part of the SCS, the claim is more of a propaganda move. The SCS is a tropical climate with frequent typhoons in the summer months and weather patterns are primarily controlled by monsoons.³⁷ Among the nations that border the SCS, there is a history of disputed land masses and China's encroachment and buildup on the various islands are methods of gaining strategic advantage.

Time: According to public policy scholar Marvin Ott, "the most likely single scenario for a major military engagement against a great power adversary would be one against China centered on the South China Sea."³⁸ The longer China can intimidate its neighbors and expand into the SCS, the more their operations become accepted over time as normal activities, thus emboldening China. China's increasing aggression indicates Beijing's clear goals for hegemony impact the environment, both regional and global.³⁹

Problem Statement

China's economic and military aggression and its refusal to acknowledge international law in the SCS threatens our Indo-Pacific security alliances, the economic interest of the United States and its allies, and the regional balance of power. According to the *National Security Strategy*, "China seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, expand the reaches of its state-driven economic model, and reorder the region in its favor."⁴⁰ There are significant problematic conditions that must be addressed to reach a satisfactory DES.

1. China's continued use of the historic and unclarified "nine-dashed line" claim as justification of their SCS expansionism.⁴¹ Interestingly, it may now be a 10-dashed line because the People's Republic of China (PRC) added a dash east of Taiwan.⁴²
2. China's attempts to intimidate United States Indo-Pacific allies using predatory economics.⁴³
3. China's aggressive posturing and militarization of artificial islands in the SCS.⁴⁴
4. Lack of a strong united global alliance and leadership and the weakening of the ASEAN and APEC, which is why President Biden intends to "deepen

our partnership with India and work alongside New Zealand, as well as Singapore, Vietnam, and other Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states, to advance shared objectives.”⁴⁵

5. Rising Chinese nationalism and an emboldened President Xi Jinping.⁴⁶

The Desired End State

The DES is a United States led Indo-Pacific region that enjoys the observance of international law and a regional balance of power that supports freedom of navigation in the SCS. The *National Security Strategy* recognizes Indo-Pacific states “are calling for sustained United States leadership in a collective response that upholds a regional order respectful of sovereignty and independence.”⁴⁷ United States leadership is needed to achieve five desired conditions:

6. Stronger regional security alliances.
7. An effective ASEAN and APEC.
8. Open sea lanes in the SCS.
9. China’s participation in third party resolution of its unclarified nine-dashed (or ten-dashed) line claim.
10. Thwart China’s aim of information dominance.

Whole-of-Government Response

Beijing is using a long-term, whole-of-government approach to realize the “Chinese Dream,” which includes continued expansion, control, and influence in the SCS that is part of the wish to reclaim its lost territories (e.g., Taiwan, Indian border, etc.).⁴⁸ Strategic competition with China in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous environment, requires our use of all instruments of national power in an integrated fashion.⁴⁹ The United States must view engagement with its allies and partners in the region through the lens of a whole-of-government perspective, including intensifying political, economic, military, and informational cooperation to strengthen nations so they can support their sovereign rights and economic independence.⁵⁰ As President Biden says in his newly released *INSSG*: “Our democratic alliances enable us to present a common front, produce a unified vision, and pool our strength to promote high standards, establish effective international rules, and hold countries like China to account.”⁵¹ The four elements of national power (Diplomatic, Information, Military and Economic, or DIME) were used as lenses to develop policies and powers of influence, but the policies should be used together for a whole-of-government approach.

Diplomatic Power: Using political communication, demarches, and information statecraft to promote the UN Tribunal’s ruling in 2016 against China’s “nine-

dash line,” the United States will influence China that participation in multilateral negotiations underpinned by international law is in their best interest.⁵² Diplomacy will be integrated with other instruments of power so that US “diplomats negotiate from a position of strength.”⁵³ This effort will seek to clarify the official Chinese position, which despite their overt, aggressive actions in the SCS, is ambiguous.⁵⁴ As specified in the *National Security Strategy*, we will publicly condemn Chinese state-owned enterprises for predatory economic strategies and leverage economic diplomacy to coerce, compel, and deter such deleterious actions against other nations of the SCS.⁵⁵ Further, the United States will highlight and condemn China’s militarization of artificial islands in the SCS and synergize our diplomatic efforts with military actions. Finally, US State Department leaders will actively engage in the Indo-Pacific, adding emphasis to the bilateral relation of important security partners, such as the Philippines, as well as to emphasize how international organizations such as ASEAN and APEC are critical to securing a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific.”⁵⁶ The United States will enhance ambassadorial status in the region or at least increase diplomatic actions, including the Ambassadors to the Philippines, Vietnam, ASEAN, and APEC, and increase the frequency and the level of key leader engagements. The United States will leverage our “like-minded allies and partners and the rest of the United States government to advance our shared vision for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific.”⁵⁷

Information Power: To deter future Chinese aggression and expansion, the United States through continued partnership with the Philippines and regional allies, must go beyond information sharing and adopt a more aggressive strategy that negates China’s aim of information dominance. Simultaneously, the United States will increase the frequency and scope of ISR gathering in the region. Increasing our involvement could signify to China a shift from the historically passive stance we have taken to one that is assertive and aligns with our current NSS. This increased involvement and showcase of strength would bring forth a new-found commitment to a collective response that upholds regional order respectful of sovereignty and independence.⁵⁸ Furthermore, these actions would influence China to freeze the militarization of its island bases—especially in the Spratly Islands—and rethink its refusal to abide by international law regarding its expansionism in the SCS.⁵⁹ Alongside sharing with China the terrorist information, the United States should be more bold on the world media stage with its condemnation of China’s infractions of international law and China’s illegal operations and buildup in the SCS as well as other potential global rights and international law issues, which aligns with the Biden Administration’s focus on China’s aggression. The United States would continue to rely on satellite imagery to provide precise information on China’s military expansion in the Spratly Islands. We would en-

gage in strong collaboration with the Philippines and our coalition partners; additional ISR assets would be reallocated to the area and surveillance patrols increased throughout the Indo-Pacific region. The increased ISR could also be leveraged by the Foreign Malign Influence Response Center that is being established within the Office of the Director for National Intelligence, as mandated by recent legislation.⁶⁰ The Center will ensure focused analysis and response on the most pressing information domain threats and develop courses of action to counter Chinese information operations. The center will enable deeper understanding of Chinese and regional leaders' perspectives, cultures, decision-making processes, risk perception and acceptance, and will allow for more effective tailored deterrence strategies.⁶¹ Ideally, the above actions would strengthen United States regional credibility as China starts to respect international law, recognize sovereign independence of regional states, discontinue its territorial expansion, and return the Indo-Pacific balance of power back to the status quo.⁶² Although a rational argument, something like this would require a sea-change in thought for the PRC.

Military Power: The aim of military power is to use cooperation and coercion to ensure that China does not continue to “maintain maritime claims in the SCS that are contrary to international law and pose a substantial long-term threat to the rules-based international order.”⁶³ By the authorities granted by international law and UNCLOS rulings and in accordance with the *National Security Strategy of 2017* and *National Defense Strategy of 2018*, US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) will leverage existing partnerships to support the partnership governments against further Chinese aggressive militarization in the SCS.⁶⁴ Either the United States needs a more forward presence near the SCS or it should move assets into the region that can better respond to China's presence. One way to indicate a powerful presence is:

The creation of a new fleet based out of Singapore, as suggested by former Secretary of the Navy Kenneth Braithwaite, would enable the US Navy to focus its efforts in the region and help boost the confidence of our ASEAN partners that the United States is there to stay. Establishing this new fleet within the South China Sea and near the Strait of Malacca would give the United States a more rapid response capability to Chinese provocations and enable a more proximate hub for freedom of navigation operations. A ubiquitous United States in Southeast Asia will also serve as a deterrent to an increasingly belligerent China and its gray-zone operations that have allowed Beijing to expand China's sphere of influence in the region relatively unopposed. Greater US military presence in Southeast Asia will not only inspire confidence from our partners in the region

but show China that its implementation of a Monroe-esque Doctrine in Asia will not go unchallenged.⁶⁵

For the coercion aspects of this course of action, the United States will send an aircraft carrier battle group supported by air assets and missile defense that are joined by partner naval and air forces to the SCS to cooperatively monitor the Chinese naval threat and other emergent threats to freedom of navigation. USINDOPACOM will increase its commitment to building alliances that create a broader coalition/alliance in the region to improve the joint interoperability of participating nations.⁶⁶ Additionally, it will work with the State Department to assist the governments of the Philippines and Vietnam in building joint information campaigns that support military operations and in building joint military medical response teams that can aid in the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶⁷ Acting in concert with established multinational organizations will have a synergistic effect in terms of impact and outcomes and increased legitimacy on the international stage. Hence, USINDOPACOM will expand their military exercise program and increasing to multilateral exercise every two years with partner nations in the region, namely the Philippines, China, Japan, Vietnam, and Indonesia.

To work toward a regional balance of power in the SCS, air and space power need to be projected in a total force concept. The aim would be to target Chinese military forces, primarily naval. Joint ISR would be used to observe, collect intelligence, and degrade Chinese capabilities and set conditions for strategic strikes, if needed. United States assets for this task would include P-8As, P-3C's, EP-3E's, and RC-135V/W's. These aircraft would collect a wide variety of information, "from full-motion video via electro-optical and infrared cameras on the P-8As and P-3Cs to a host of signals and electronic intelligence via the sensor suites on the EP-3Es and RC-135s."⁶⁸ Additionally, both satellite and drone tracking would be a key element to intelligence and surveillance gathering. Combining all these capabilities would allow for joint planning efforts to meet potential Chinese threats, as well as surveillance of terrorist groups. Cyber forces could attack Chinese satellites to dominate and protect the space domain. Control of the space domain is imperative, as our satellites must be operational due to our reliance on GPS and other technologies of our weapon systems. Simultaneously, cyber actions would be deployed to disrupt China's military operations, impairing computer systems responsible for "data communications and computation for command and control,...ISR, targeting, navigation, weapon guidance, battle assessment and logistics management, among other key functions."⁶⁹ Strategic targets would include Chinese information and collection assets largely controlled by Chinese air and naval forces, air and surface radar, interisland communications, high-frequency communications, electronic warfare and signals intelligence, un-

manned systems, and sub-reef counterstealth radar, undersea fiber-optic cable, and satellite communications.⁷⁰ If required, military information support operations could be enhanced in the region through information warfare, via the coalition/alliances, particularly to support pro-messaging to civilian populations and degrade the informal info networks of Chinese civilian boats and fishermen.

Economic Power: China's economic status in the region and world will continue to allow them to bully the countries in the Indo-Pacific region. We will utilize cooperation among the Indo-Pacific countries to ensure China comes back to the bargaining table and to support the overarching goal of "a free and open Indo-Pacific region."⁷¹ We will continue to deepen cooperation with India and other nations within the region on an economic and political level. We must revive the Geo-Economic trade and investment sanctions that were proposed in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) during the Obama Administration. According to President Obama, "We can't let countries like China write the rules of the global economy. We should write those rules."⁷² The TPP and CPTPP are different and will require different approaches:

Despite the withdrawal of the world's largest economy from the agreement, CPTPP is one of the largest free trade agreements in the world, representing nearly 13.5 percent of global gross domestic product (GDP). The agreement links 11 Asia-Pacific economies—Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, and Vietnam—providing freer trade and investment access among its members. Most of the original TPP text remains intact, and two-thirds of the CPTPP's 30 chapters are identical to TPP.⁷³

Reviving the TPP or joining the newly ratified CPTPP is foundational for the SCS region and would put additional pressure on China by increasing the trade opportunities beyond those offered by China.⁷⁴ As part of the reviving of the TPP and/or becoming a member of the CPTPP, we must work with all Indo-Pacific countries, including the PRC, to join the trade agreement. Most importantly for this situation, the Philippines. Having a strong contingent of Indo-Pacific countries in a collective trade deal will put pressure on China to readdress their geo-economic strategies in the region that have been largely successful in creating a reliance on China to fund projects throughout the globe.⁷⁵

Conclusion

Chinese expansion in the SCS is detrimental to the stability and security of the IPR. The article used a PMESII-PT approach to develop courses of action that were nested with current strategy, but more importantly, focused at 1) thwarting

China's information dominance by stopping the use of military controlled assets in the SCS with actions that will "press on" amid China's threats and use of C4ISR and 2) combined cyber and precision strikes on China's key economic and informational capabilities. Nonaction will only further embolden China and reduce freedom of movement in the SCS for trade, transport, and security. In his March 4, 2021 "Message to the Force," US Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin prioritized China:

The Department will prioritize China as our number one pacing challenge and develop the right operational concepts, capabilities, and plans to bolster deterrence and maintain our competitive advantage. We will ensure that our approach toward China is coordinated and synchronized across the enterprise to advance our priorities, integrated into domestic and foreign policy in a whole-of-government strategy, strengthened by our alliances and partnerships, and supported on a bipartisan basis in Congress.⁷⁶

The recommended actions put forth above advocate for a whole-of-government approach that will protect the interests of the United States in the region by preserving freedom of the seas, protecting partners and allies, and limiting China's sphere of influence. This article places China's aggression and aim of information dominance in the SCS as the number one priority in the Indo-Pacific region and supports President Biden's agenda to "strengthen our enduring advantages and allow us to prevail in strategic competition with China or any other nation."⁷⁷ 🌟

Dr. John Hinck, Colonel, USA (ret.)

A retired Army Colonel with more than 22 years of service as a combat leader and Apache pilot, Dr. Hinck is an assistant professor at Air University where he teaches research methodology and leading change. A board-certified executive/leadership coach, Dr. Hinck is involved with Leadership Montgomery—a cite-wide program that brings together leaders to study and solve critical community issues. Hinck is also invited faculty at the Hansen Summer Institute for International Peace and Cooperation, where he teaches leadership and problem solving to international fellows from 22 participating countries.

Lt Col Brian Ashburn, USAF

A former pilot of RC-135 reconnaissance aircraft and E-8 airborne ground surveillance, battle management and command and control aircraft, Lt Col Ashburn is the Director of Operations for Air Force Initial Flight Training in Pueblo, Colorado. Prior to this assignment he served as Chief, Combat Operations for the 613th Air Operations Center assigned to Headquarters, Pacific Air Force, Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Hawaii.

Lt Col Bryan McNaughton, AL ANG

Lt Col McNaughton is the Director of Operations for the Alabama Air National Guard's 226th Combat Communications Group headquartered in Montgomery, Alabama. Attaining the rank of Master Sergeant prior to being commissioned in 2001, Lt Col McNaughton has also served as the AL ANG's Chief of Supply at the 187th Fighter Wing, Communications, and Information Officer for the 226th Combat Communications Group, and Commander of the 280th Special Operations Communications Squadron.

Lt Col Thomas Heier, USAF

Lt Col Heier is a bioenvironmental engineer and Deputy Director, Occupational Health Policy in the Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Air Force, (Environment, Safety, and Infrastructure). Previously, he served with the Office of the Secretary of the Air force, the Defense Threat Reduction Agency, and the United States Air Force Academy.

Lt Col Timothy Liebold, USAF

As Commander, 701st Munitions Support Squadron, 52d Munitions Maintenance Group, 52d Fighter Wing, Kleine Brogel Air Base in Belgium, Lt Col Liebold is responsible for 160 personnel across 25 Air Force specialties. Liebold is also responsible for the US war reserve munitions in support of the Belgian Air Force's 10th Wing Tactical and the Strategic Concept for the Defense and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Lt Col Robert Pearce, USAF

As Chief of Training for the 317th Airlift Squadron, Joint Base Charleston in South Carolina, Lt Col Pearce commands combat-ready C-17 transportation aircraft crews performing strategic and tactical mobility missions worldwide, assisting in the instruction and evaluation of individual pilot abilities and squadron tasking.

Notes

1. US Department of Defense "Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region" 1 June 2019.
2. Stephen F. Burgess, "Confronting China's Maritime Expansion in the South China Sea," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 3, no. 3 (Fall 2020), 112, <https://media.defense.gov/>.
3. Roger Cliff, "A New U.S. Strategy for the Indo-Pacific," NBR Special Report no. 86, 16 June 2020, 7. For further information, Cliff draws on several sources: the Commission on America's National Interests, "America's National Interests," July 2000, <https://www.belfercenter.org/>; U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, "2016 Annual Report to Congress," November 2016, 475-77, <https://www.uscc.gov/>; Robert D. Blackwill, "Defending Vital U.S. Interests: Policy Prescriptions for Trump," *Foreign Policy*, 25 January 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/>; and Charles Boustany and Richard J. Ellings, "China and the Strategic Imperative for the United States," *Asia Policy* 13, no. 1 (2018): 47-67.
4. Cliff, "A New U.S. Strategy for the Indo-Pacific," 111.
5. J. Michael Dahn, "Introduction to South China Sea Military Capability Studies," part of the *South China Sea Military Capability Series – A Survey of Technologies and Capabilities on China's Military Outposts in the South China Sea*, Johns Hopkins University, July 2020.
6. Joseph Biden, *United States Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* (INSSG), March 2021, 8.
7. David Geaney, "How the Biden Administration Should Counter China in Southeast Asia," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 4, no. 2 (Spring 2021), 257-62, <https://media.defense.gov/>; and "How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea?," *ChinaPower*, 2020, <https://chinapower.csis.org/>.
8. United States *National Security Strategy* (NSS), December 2017, 46.
9. David J. Firestein, "The US-China Perception Gap in the South China Sea," *The Diplomat*, 19 August 2016, 4, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

10. Kevin Baumert and Brian Melchior, "China: Maritime Claims in the South China Sea," Office of Ocean and Polar Affairs Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs, US Department of State, 2014, 1.

11. Aditya Singh Verma, "A Case for the United States' Ratification of UNCLOS," *The Diplomatist*, 2 May 2020, 3. <https://diplomatist.com/>.

12. Statement of Admiral Philip S. Davidson, US Navy, Commander US Indo-Pacific Command, Before the House Armed Services Committee, 27 March 2019, 9.

13. Firestein, "The US-China Perception Gap," 2.

14. Davidson statement, 3–7.

15. Andrew Scobell, "The South China Sea and U.S.-China Rivalry," *Political Science Quarterly* 133, no. 2 (2018), 215, DOI: 10.1002/polq.12772.

16. Derek Grossman, "Military Build-Up in the South China Sea," RAND, 28 January 2020, <https://www.rand.org/>; Leszek Buszynski and Do Thanh Hai, eds., *The South China Sea: From a Regional Maritime Dispute to a Geostategic Competition*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, December 2019), <https://www.routledge.com/>.

17. Burgess, "Confronting China's Maritime Expansion."

18. Andrew Scobell, Michael McMahan, and Cortez A. Cooper III, "China's Aircraft Carrier Program: Drives, Development, Implications," *Naval War College Review* 68, no. 4 (Autumn 2015): 65–77.

19. Burgess, "Confronting China's Maritime Expansion"; and Grossman, "Military Build-Up in the South China Sea."

20. Shotaro Miyasaka and Junnosuke Kobara, "Indo-Pacific's Military Equipment Buying Spree Risks Arms Race," *Nikkei Asia – DATAWATCH*, 1 November 2020, 3, <https://asia.nikkei.com/>.

21. Derek Grossman and Logan Ma, "A Short History of China's Fishing Militia and What It May Tell Us," *The RAND Blog*, 6 April 2020, <https://www.rand.org/>.

22. Mohammad Masudur Rahman, Chanwahn Kim, and Prabir De, "Indo-Pacific Cooperation: What Do Trade Simulations Indicate?," *Economic Structures* 9, no. 45 (2020), <https://journalofeconomicstructures.springeropen.com/>.

23. Diana Farrell, Ulrich A. Gersch, and Elizabeth Stephenson, "The Value of China's Emerging Middle Class," *McKinsey Quarterly*, 1 June 2006, 2–4, <https://www.mckinsey.com/>.

24. Ane Bislev and Xing Li, "Conceptualizing the Cultural and Political Facets of 'Chinese Nationalism' in an Era of China's Global Rise," *International Communication of Chinese Culture* 1, no. 1–2 (2014), 21, <https://link.springer.com/>.

25. Bislev and Li, "Conceptualizing the Cultural and Political Facets," 30.

26. Alastair Iain Johnston, "Chinese Middle-Class Attitudes Towards International Affairs: Nascent Liberalization?," *China Quarterly*, No. 179 (September 2004), 603–28, <https://www.jstor.org/>.

27. Homi Kharas and Meagan Dooley, "China's Influence on the Global Middle Class - Global China: Assessing China's Growing Role in the World," *Global Governance and Norms*, October 2020, Brookings Institute, <https://www.brookings.edu/>.

28. Linh Tong, "The Social Media 'War' over the South China Sea—Vietnamese, Chinese, and Filipinos Spar Online after the Recent Tribunal Ruling on the South China Sea," *The Diplomat*, 16 July 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

29. Michael Dahm, "Beyond Conventional Wisdom: Evaluating the PLA's South China Sea Bases in Operational Context," *War on the Rocks*, March 2020. <https://warontherocks.com/>.
30. Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) Pub 3-13, *Joint Doctrine for Information Operations (IO)*, 9 October 1998, I9; and Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) Pub 3-13.1, *Joint Command and Control Warfare (C2W) Operations*, 7 February 1996, I3.
31. James Mulvenon, "The PLA and Information Warfare," in *The People's Liberation Army in the Information Age*, ed. James Mulvenon and Richard H. Yang (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1999), 176–77, <https://www.rand.org/>.
32. NORAD and USNORTHCOM Strategic Strategy, Executive Summary, March 2021, 6.
33. Admiral Philip S. Davidson, US Navy, Commander US Indo-Pacific Command, testimony to Full House Armed Services Committee Hearing: "National Security Challenges and U.S. Military Activities in the Indo-Pacific," Wednesday, 10 March 2021.
34. Xue Gong, "The Role of Chinese Corporate Players in China's South China Sea Policy," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 40, no. 2 (2018): 310–26.
35. "Transportation in the Philippines: The Complete Guide," *Via Hero*, 15 December 2020, <https://www.viahero.com/>; and The World Bank, "Country Profile: Philippines," <https://databank.worldbank.org/>.
36. See: J. Michael Dahm, *South China Sea Military Capabilities Series: A Survey of Technologies and Capabilities on China's Military Outposts in the South China Sea* (Laurel, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory, 2020).
37. Eugene C. LaFond, "South China Sea," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 16 April, <https://www.britannica.com/>.
38. Marvin Ott, "The South China Sea in Strategic Terms," *Asia Dispatches* (blog), 14 May 2019, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/>.
39. Rosemary Foot, "China's Rise and US hegemony: Renegotiating Hegemonic Order in East Asia?," *International Politics* 57 (2020): 150–65, <https://doi.org/>; and Hal Brands and Jake Sullivan, "China Has Two Paths to Global Domination," *Foreign Policy*, 22 May 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>.
40. *NSS*, 25.
41. Baumert and Melchior, "China: Maritime Claims in the South China Sea," 1.
42. Harry Kazianis, "China's 10 Red Lines in the South China Sea with the Publication of Its Latest Map, China Has Declared 'Mapware' in the Western Pacific," *The Diplomat*, 1 July 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/>.
43. *United States National Military Strategy (NMS)*, 2018, 1.
44. *NSS*, 6.
45. Joshua Espena and Anne Uy, "Brunei, ASEAN and the South China Sea," *The Interpreter*, 3 August 2020, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/>.
46. Bisley and Li, "Conceptualizing the Cultural and Political Facets," 21.
47. *NSS*, 46.
48. Bisley and Li, "Conceptualizing the Cultural and Political Facets," 21–33; and Jim Garamone, "White House Report Recommends Multi-Pronged Approach to Counter China," *Defense News*, 5 June 2020, <https://www.defense.gov/>.
49. JP 5-0 2021, I-24, E-2; and Statement by Secretary Michael R. Pompeo, "U.S. Position on Maritime Claims in the South China Sea," 21 July 2020, 1, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/>.
50. Davidson testimony, 4.

51. *INSSG*, 10.
52. Davidson testimony, 1; and *NSS*, 35.
53. Pompeo, "U.S. Position on Maritime Claims," 1.
54. *NDS*, 1.
55. Firestein, "The US-China Perception Gap," 5.
56. *NSS*, 34.
57. Davidson testimony, 3.
58. Zachary Torrey, "TPP 2.0: The Deal without the US, What's New about the CPTPP and What Do the Changes Mean?," *The Diplomat*, 3 February 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/>.
59. Earl Anthony Wayne, "The Death of TPP: The Best Thing That Ever Happened to China," *National Interest*, 29 January 2017, <https://nationalinterest.org/>.
60. See: 50 U.S. Code § 3059.
61. M. Elaine Bunn, "Can Deterrence Be Tailored," *Strategic Forum*, No. 225, January 2007, 2, <https://apps.dtic.mil/>.
62. Patricia Ranald, "RCEP Has Limited Trade Gains and Ignores Labour and Human Rights," *Australian Outlook*, 17 November 2020, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/>.
63. United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), 1982, 7, <https://www.un.org/>.
64. UNCLOS, 9.
65. Geaney, "How the Biden Administration Should Counter China." For additional sources, see: Megan Eckstein, "SECNAV Braithwaite Calls for New U.S. 1st Fleet Near Indian, Pacific Oceans," *USNI News*, 17 November 2020, <https://news.usni.org/>; David Geaney, "China's Island Fortifications Are a Challenge to International Norms," *Defense News*, 17 April 2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/>; Lyle J. Morris, et al., *Gaining Competitive Advantage in the Gray Zone Response Options for Coercive Aggression Below the Threshold of Major War* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019), <https://www.rand.org/>.
66. *NDS*, 9.
67. *NMS*, 2–3.
68. Joseph Trevithick, "American Surveillance Aircraft Have Been Flooding into The Airspace South of Taiwan," *The War Zone*, 10 July 2020, <https://www.thedrive.com/>.
69. David C. Gompert and Martin Libicki, "Waging Cyber War the American Way," *Survival* 57, no. 4 (22 July 2015): 7–28, <https://www.tandfonline.com/>.
70. Dahm, *South China Sea Military Capabilities*.
71. *NDS*, 9.
72. Victor A. Teixeira, "China on Stage: Assumptions and Strategies in South China Sea," *Asian Journal of Social Science Studies* 3, no. 3 (2018), 57.
73. Matthew P. Goodman, "From TPP to CPTPP," *Critical Questions*, 8 March 2018, <https://www.csis.org/>.
74. *NSS*, 46.
75. Steven Stashwick, "Leveraging US Military Power in South China Sea," *The Diplomat*, 22 August 2007, <https://thediplomat.com/>.
76. Lloyd J. Austin III, United States Defense Secretary, Message to the Force, 4 March 2021, 1, <https://media.defense.gov/>.
77. *INSSG*, 10.