

Beijing's Reach in the South China Sea*

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Abstract

This presentation posits that notwithstanding the phenomenal island-building and militarization efforts of China's outposts in the Spratly Islands, their future is far from absolutely certain given Chinese military planners' cognizance about their strategic and operational utility. That aside, however, there is much greater certainty about China's buildup of long-range kinetic weapons and offshore-capable mobile platforms and perhaps as significantly, noteworthy inroads made in Beijing's steady enhancement of its maritime domain awareness in the South China Sea, especially in the underwater realm. This aspect, which has in recent times gained more attention, would significantly expand China's military reach into the South China Sea, helping cement its physical control and domination of the area—especially when its Southeast Asian rivals contrast sharply with their shortfalls in both kinetic projection as well as maritime domain awareness capabilities. In view of these developments, the role of allies and partners becomes even more important from both military and non-military perspectives.

Thank you. I think Greg has more or less covered so much, and I don't really see how I could value add except probably touch on a few salient points and I think perhaps I will first answer the question about what exactly is the South China Sea to China, and whether we could shape China's behavior in the South China Sea. I will go back to my original argument, that instead of we trying to shape Chinese behavior, I think it is the other way around. Beijing wants to shape our behavior instead, in the South China Sea.

But first of all is perhaps to acknowledge that the South China Sea is basically what the Chinese will call "the blue territory." It carries, strategic, economic, emotional, as well as historical significance, and that gives rise to how China looks at the South China Sea on the whole. It is not just about protecting your sovereignty and your rights but also to create what I will call a strategic depth that can promote greater security for mainland China.

So it carries all these significance such that these are—cannot be viewed as interests to the other parties, but again, I would look at mostly the military aspects of the South China Sea—what China has been doing over the past few years. We look at largely the projection of military assets over the course of the past decade, and you'll find that, on the whole, the number of ships, say for example in the South Sea Fleet, and right now the Navy of the Southern Theater Command has generally been hovering around the same numbers.

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But even that, it is important to look at the qualitative improvements that the Chinese Navy and Air Force has achieved over the past three years. Numbers may have remained static, but the type of capabilities that have been infused into service has become increasingly more capable.

And we cannot forget also, in concurrence with the buildup of mobile assets, we are looking at the buildup in missile arsenal that can allow force projection further afield, even beyond the South China Sea.

And in the most recent years we have been seeing some very interesting developments when it comes to the People's Liberation Army (PLA) services trying to promote more jointness amongst themselves. For example, the Rocket Force coordinating with the Support Force and coordinating with the Navy in offshore training exercises, so that is of great significance.

And lastly the one other very important aspect would be the artificial islands that were being built so far. And suffice to say is minus a way to Scarborough Shoal, I think basically the construction has been done, and has been consolidated as well. And what we are seeing here in a next five to ten years will be the maintenance of these outposts and to beef up their capabilities.

Then I have some more nuanced argument towards that. There is news that talks about the deployment of electronic warfare systems, such as HQ-9s, surface-to-air missile systems, anti-ship missiles. What is suffice to say is that those are essentially mobile systems. Very often we imagine that you put those systems on the islands and they stay there forever, but if you look at the general Chinese military modernization, you'll find that there has been greater emphasis on essentially mobile and readily deployable systems. The fact that those artificial islands have airstrips and harbors could allow the rapid deployment of these systems and in converse, rapid withdrawal of these systems, allow the Chinese more flexibility in terms of areas like escalation control as well as signaling.

So what is actually more important is not so much about the weapon systems which were being put in place, but more because of the existing infrastructure that allows China the freedom of options to pursue. And that of course raises a question of what we mean by militarization. If you are talking about mobile systems that can be put into place and withdrawn anytime that you want, how do you find ways to tackle that particular aspect?

Say, for example, I always want to argue in the current context of the negotiation over the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea. And of course for the Chinese, I wanted to just raise some counterpoints to what most would see as the islands that could never go away down right—unsinkable aircraft carriers.

I would be more uncertain to that. I think what is suffice to say is PLA officials privately and publicly acknowledged that in a wartime situation these islands are practically close to useless. They will be taken out almost immediately on onset of any conflict in the South China Sea. But what we see here will be largely those islands being used for peacetime utility, for example, being used for blockading actions, some limited forms of offensive operations, but more likely defensive operations.

And the bigger question that I think the Chinese are facing right now is how to viably and sustainably operate those islands and ensure that they remain there. And currently, it is interesting to note that the Chinese do actually have some questions as to whether those artificial islands are geomorphologically stable in the longer term. Right now they are conducting studies, for example, looking at how coral and concrete can actually glue together properly so that they will not be washed away, or they will not be corroded over time, by the natural elements of the weather and the climate.

China is also studying the whole big question of military assets operating in essentially saline maritime environment. The one interesting thing is that the PLA acknowledges, and they are very proud to say, that they have reached a stage where they could reduce and mitigate corrosion for airframes, but they have also acknowledged that in terms of preventing or mitigating corrosion

on electronic systems, the situation is very separate.

We look at platforms not just in terms of the frame itself, but also electronics. For electronics, the Chinese find themselves rather not so capable in terms of preventing and mitigating corrosion, so they are trying to find ways and means to do that. In the next five to ten years there is a high chance that the Chinese will find a way to get around with these challenges, but then again the bigger question will be how those islands or features will play a bigger role in the future conflict or a limited conflict scenario in the South China Sea.

But what is certain to me is, if you put aside the question of whether those islands do exist in the five to ten years' time, whether they get sunk by a natural disaster, or they just get corroded naturally away, that the one area we have forgotten and we might not have been too focused on is the area of what we call maritime domain awareness. That is part of a bigger picture of what we call intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities. The Chinese have been moving very resolutely into these directions, and the one area that I thought was interesting is the very dual-use, sometimes very innocuous-sounding term called ocean observation network.

That ocean observation network has been acknowledged to be used not just to mitigate or prevent natural disasters at sea, but more ostensibly used for military purposes. In that regard we are seeing here in the next five to ten years tremendous amount of effort by the Chinese in terms of improving especially the area of underwater observation.

The one area that has so far evaded much of the scrutiny is a collaborative R&D arrangements with various key institutions that somehow indirectly fits into these programs. The Chinese could actually benefit from a whole slew of these arrangements. These arrangements could allow them to have what I will call, not just domain awareness, but dominant awareness in the South China Sea in the next five to ten years.

I am not so sure whether we can reach an equilibrium position. I think much of it depends on a lot of things. Assuming that those islands will not get washed away by any geological phenomenon and the Chinese finally find a way to strengthen them and make them stay forever, I think much of it depends on a few factors. One is that I think in the next five to ten years we will be envisaging the promulgation of a Code of Conduct, I mean because they were talking about three years, right?

So let's assume that in the next five years—give them two years more—they have a Code of Conduct. My very, not so sanguine thought is the moment they sign it, they will have the urgent handshake together, take the picture of it, and have the headlines being splashed with the achievement; in less than one year time, you're going to see the Code of Conduct rendered to be useless. And that, largely will be because the one big question we ask, and probably also the Chinese are going to ask, once we sign the code of conduct is, "Would that be the end of foreign military activities in the South China Sea?" And I don't think we are going to envisage that happening actually because all of us agreed the South China Sea was an international medium, and the mere operation of military vessels in even the international waters within the South China Sea could still be deemed as potentially provocative to China.

The point is that the Code of Conduct will never hold or will not hold at all. And that actually may lead to a whole new round of potential escalation and crisis altogether. I am not trying to apportion any particular blame to anyone, but what I am trying to say is that the envisioned structure of the Code of Conduct is not likely going to entail agreement that makes everybody happy and yet makes everybody unhappy at the same time.

So that is one issue. The second is to have the equilibrium, we may need to ensure that there is policy consistency on the part of Southeast Asian countries. If we are looking at certain Southeast Asian Countries, like Malaysia, Philippines and Indonesia, you really have to look at election cycle—the leaders that will be in power, and whether they change the policy in the first place. I think a lot of it is to have mercy to that aspect.

I think, perhaps, what is more important in this context is to empower the Southeast Asian countries, and this is nothing new. I think what we are seeing here is basically a continued enhancement of existing initiatives that help boost the Southeast Asia's maritime awareness capability.

And I think perhaps close US allies and partners who have common interest in the South China Sea, should at least to try coordinate or to synergize efforts in capacity building because what we are seeing here right now is a hodgepodge of very different initiatives that are being implemented. So, find the South China Sea and how we are going to harmonize all them together to ensure there are no duplication and no overlaps in those capacity building. I thought that was probably the one area to at least try to minimize the adverse impact of, you know, responding to such a situation in the South China Sea.