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Journal

SITC-NWC 2013 Policy Briefs, 2013(6)

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Publication Date

2013-04-01



RICH REGION, STRONG STATES: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF SECURITY IN ASIA

POLICY BRIEF 2013-6, APRIL 2013

China's Political Uses of Seapower

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SUMMARY

China's recent assertiveness in the South China Seas is a harbinger of things to come. Beijing's seapower project and the enormous resources it has enjoyed have opened up new strategic vistas for Chinese leaders and military commanders. With larger and more capable seagoing forces at its disposal, Beijing is well positioned to fashion sophisticated strategies that will be more effective and equally difficult to counter. While such strategies do not—yet—portend the fundamental reordering of maritime Southeast Asia, they will likely yield incremental dividends that advance China's larger aims at sea.

The Study of Innovation and Technology in China (SITC) is a project of the University of California Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation. SITC-NWC Policy Briefs provide analysis and recommendations based on the work of project participants. This material is based upon work supported by, or in part by, the U.S. Army Research Laboratory and the U.S. Army Research Office through the Minerva Initiative under grant #W911NF-09-1-0081. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Army Research Laboratory and the U.S. Army Research Office.

COMPREHENSIVE CHINESE SEAPOWER

China's naval and maritime buildup is providing Beijing with the wherewithal to pursue its ambitions. The rate and scale of the People's Liberation Army Navy's (PLAN) modernization process have defied many predictions in the West, reversing sanguine and even condescending conclusions about China's aptitude at sea. But seapower is more than just the navy. Rather, it is a continuum that gives Beijing a range of options. Non-naval and non-military platforms and systems account for a significant portion of Chinese seapower.

Long-range, precision-strike weaponry deployed on the mainland can influence events, perhaps decisively, at sea. The anti-ship ballistic missile—a maneuverable ballistic missile capable of hitting moving targets at sea—is just one member of a large family of missiles in China's arsenal that could perform maritime-strike missions. Indeed, the PLA boasts large numbers of shore-based fighters, bombers, and cruise missile units that can launch salvos of anti-ship missiles.

The growth of China's maritime surveillance and law-enforcement services has been equally impressive. The civilian arm of Chinese seapower has enabled Beijing to dispatch nonmilitary ships to confront the Philippines in the South China Sea and Japan in the East China Sea. Even civilian vessels could form maritime militias to serve China's nautical aims. In short, Beijing possesses diverse elements of seapower to defend its prerogatives in the nautical domain.

POLITICAL USES OF MILITARY AND NON-MILITARY FORCES

Beijing's burgeoning seapower has positioned it to employ strategies that involve the political uses of military and non-military implements of seapower against weaker opponents in the South China Sea. These strategies deftly combine war-fighting capabilities with calibrated shows of force. They enhance China's leverage in protracted politico-military struggles by chipping away at the will of the opponent.

In the event of peacetime maritime crises between China and relatively weak Southeast Asian powers, innovative combinations of PLA forces could be used to compel the will of Beijing's southern neighbors. Consider the aforementioned anti-ship ballistic missile. If it performs as advertised, the missile would help compensate for current shortcomings in China's maritime inventory. The reach of such shore fire support over the entire South China Sea would ease the burdens on the Chinese fleet while applying constant pressure on challengers to Beijing's interests in peacetime.

Under the protective umbrella of anti-ship ballistic missiles, even lesser warships would be ideal for intimidating weaker parties. For example, small flotillas of missile-armed fast-attack craft operating in the Spratlys under missile cover could hold most Southeast Asian surface fleets at bay. Occasional sorties of such units would signal Chinese resolve, compelling opponents to back down or acquiesce to Beijing's wishes. This type of gunboat diplomacy with Chinese characteristics is conceivable in future crises.

China's ability to exercise the non-military elements of its seapower was on full display at Scarborough Shoal during the spring of 2011. The standoff with the Philippines involved coast-guard-like noncombat vessels under the control of China Marine Surveillance (CMS), an agency entrusted with protecting Beijing's exclusive economic zones. To the north, various CMS vessels have conducted "routine monitoring" in waters near the Senkakus following Tokyo's decision to nationalize the disputed islands in September 2012.

Employing non-navy assets in clashes over territory reveals a sophisticated, methodical strategy for securing China's maritime claims. The use of non-military means eschews the kinds of escalation that warships would likely provoke while ensuring that disputes remain localized. Specifically, it deprives the United States and other outside powers of the rationales to step in on behalf of embattled capitals in the region.

At the same time, noncombat ships empower Beijing to exert low-grade but unremitting pressure on rival claimants to South China Sea islands and waters. Constant patrols can probe weaknesses in coastal states' maritime-surveillance capacity while testing their political resolve. Keeping disputes at a low simmer, moreover, grants China the diplomatic initiative to turn up or down the heat as strategic circumstances warrant.

And if all else fails, Beijing can still employ its navy and shore-based assets as a backstop to the civilian agencies. That China—unlike its weaker rivals—has the option of climbing the escalation ladder only amplifies the intimidation factor in places like Scarborough Shoal or the Spratly Islands. As noted above, the mere possibility of naval coercion may induce an opponent to back down in a crisis. Indeed, the more the naval balance skews in China's favor, the more pressure Southeast Asian capitals will feel as they contemplate their options.

Although innocuous in themselves, peacetime patrols carry significant weight when backed by real firepower. The interplay between Chinese military and non-military forces thus augments Beijing's strategic leverage.

A STRATEGY OF EXHAUSTION AT SEA?

Sporadic acts of coercion and intimidation may not produce outcomes as visible or decisive as a battlefield victory. A series of showdowns may pass without an end in sight or any tangible gain for China. But the cumulative effects of a continuing stalemate could induce strategic fatigue that in turn advances China's aims. Short of a shooting war, Chinese provocations are too slight for the United States to intervene militarily. Staying below the escalation threshold adds maneuver room to test U.S. steadfastness while solidifying China's claims.

As China pushes and probes, regional expectations that Washington should do something would inevitably mount even as weaker nations look for signs of wavering U.S. resolve. The prospects of recurring confrontations with little hope of direct U.S. intervention could weigh heavily on Southeast Asian capitals. Applied with patience and discipline, such a strategy of exhaustion could gradually erode regional confidence and undermine the political will to resist.

But this attritional approach is only a snapshot of Chinese seapower today. It is possible that Beijing's application of graduated pressure is merely a stopgap measure, buying China time to build up the capacity to dictate events at sea. Recent trends suggest that both the military and non-military services will continue to bulk up on a steady diet of new hardware and manpower.

Twenty years of virtually uninterrupted double-digit hikes in the defense budget have afforded China the resources to develop options beyond those dedicated to a Taiwan contingency, an all-consuming preoccupation until recently. Analysts have detected military buildups in staging areas assigned to the Southeast Asian theater of operations. Beijing also appears to be pushing naval construction along multiple axes simultaneously, laying down hulls for warships of every type.

Similarly, the maritime-enforcement services are recruiting new manpower while taking delivery of decommissioned naval vessels. Furthermore, Chinese shipyards are turning out state-of-the-art cutters like sausages. Many are capable of sustained patrols in the farthest reaches of the China seas, assuring that Beijing can maintain a visible presence in waters where it asserts sovereign jurisdiction. Indeed, *Haijian* 84, one of China's most modern law-enforcement vessels, occupied the epicenter of the Scarborough Shoal imbroglio.

To be sure, China still lacks adequate military means to make the South China Sea a Chinese lake. Sea control that more or less permanently excludes ri-

val navies from these waters remains beyond its reach, if indeed that is the goal.

Nevertheless, even a modest increase in Chinese seapower could perceptibly tip the regional balance of power in Beijing's favor in peacetime contingencies not involving the U.S. Navy. Some local players, notably Vietnam, have embarked on naval modernization programs, but they are unlikely to keep pace with China. Over time, left unopposed by powerful outsiders such as the United States, Japan, or Australia, even small-scale shows of Chinese maritime power over Southeast Asian fleets might start to win grudging acquiescence to Beijing's foreign policy preferences. Such consent, however reluctant, would deliver a severe blow to the foundations of regional order.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE U.S. "REBALANCING" TO ASIA

The foregoing analysis underscores the predicament of many Southeast Asian states if they faced China on their own. Not surprisingly, many regional capitals look to the United States as a bulwark against Chinese advances. They recognize that American primacy in maritime Asia will be the crucial arbiter of Chinese ambitions. Washington, for its part, has delivered very public pronouncements about its own stake in Asian waters. The Obama administration's "pivot" or "rebalancing" to Asia sought to reassure audiences in the region that the United States will not abdicate the stabilizing role it has long played.

Fortunately, there is still time to maximize this convergence of interests and organize an effective response. China is at least a decade away from amassing the type of preponderant seapower that can keep the United States out of the South China Sea while running roughshod over Southeast Asian states. In the meantime, Washington can adopt measures to ensure that regional submission to China's wishes is not a foregone conclusion.

First, Washington and its allies should actively help Southeast Asian states help themselves. Local actors must possess some indigenous capability to cope with Chinese encroachments at sea. The U.S. transfer of 1960s-vintage coast guard cutters to the Philippines is a modest step in the right direction. The timing of the deliveries turned out to be fortuitous: the first Philippine vessel to respond off Scarborough Shoal was flagship BRP *Gregorio del Pilar*, the former USCGC *Hamilton*. But hand-me-downs are not enough to meet Manila's needs. More modern and capable platforms are necessary to match China's vessels. Japan's recent offer of twelve brand-new patrol boats to the Philip-

pires is another encouraging sign that outside powers are seeking to right the regional balance of power.

Second, the United States should encourage the development of a region-wide effort to keep track of China's maritime forces. Unmanned aerial systems, for instance, could furnish a common picture of the nautical domain on a more-or-less permanent basis to coastal states surrounding the South China Sea. By tapping into such technologies, an information sharing arrangement that makes Asian waters both figuratively and literally more transparent would go a long way to shore up regional confidence and deterrence. It is worth noting that Tokyo has been doing a signal service on behalf of the region by publicly reporting detailed accounts of Chinese naval transits through international straits and other activities near Japanese waters.

Third, the United States should draw up plans that would enable the U.S. military to rapidly deploy units armed with maritime-strike capability, such as anti-ship cruise missile batteries, on friendly or allied soil. Possessing the option to surge defensive forces onto allied territory at short notice would reassure U.S. allies in peacetime while substantially bolstering the U.S. capacity to act effectively in times of crisis. American reinforcements would steady nerves while stiffening the resolve of local defenders. The United States should also encourage allies and friends to develop or strengthen their own maritime-strike options.

Finally, the U.S. Navy should revisit prevailing assumptions about its ability to command the global commons. Years of post-Cold War permissiveness induced an airy confidence that made it seductively easy to take sea control for granted. Arguably, the last time that the U.S. Navy fought a serious foe was at Leyte

Gulf in 1944. As China marches to the seas, a far more lethal nautical environment lies in store. For a service long accustomed to uncontested waters, coming to terms with risk to the fleet will be an urgent priority.

NETWORKING THE REGION

These steps would help construct a layered and interconnected defense posture that begins with the local actors themselves. As frontline states, they must be empowered to perform as first responders to Chinese moves at sea. Information sharing among the coastal states would underscore the shared stakes in the maritime commons while promoting collective action. A network of players alert to Beijing's maneuvers stands a far better chance of deterring, and, failing that, reacting quickly to Chinese actions. The United States, for its part, would provide a strategic backstop to Southeast Asian partners with low-profile, small-footprint military assets that pack a punch and serve as potent symbols of American commitment to the region.

Raising the costs of—and risks to—Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea would complicate Beijing's calculus while inclining Chinese leaders to think twice before they act. Inducing Chinese caution, moreover, would apply a brake to Beijing's momentum at sea, brightening the prospects for restoring equilibrium to the region and for retaking the strategic initiative.

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