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CAMPAIGNS AND DRONES: MARITIME SECURITY IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

Abstract: *The United States Navy remains active in the South China Sea, conducting operations to uphold the freedom of global commerce and navigation. This effort counters the People's Republic of China's expansive maritime campaign, which seeks to assert territorial control over the region by constructing artificial islands. Despite the South China Sea being part of the international commons, Beijing continues to militarize these islands, deploying naval forces while its Coast Guard harasses civilian vessels from neighboring states, particularly the Philippines. While diplomatic solutions remain possible, any attack on the Philippines would trigger a U.S. response under the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty between Washington and Manila.*

Keywords: *Maritime security, the South China Sea, the People's Republic of China (PRC), the United States Navy, disputed islands*

1. INTRODUCTION

The People's Republic of China's (PRC) vital objectives and long-term well-being contradict the stated national interests of the United States (USA). Specifically, since the Second World War, the United States has tried to maintain an international order in which the world's trade, communication, and navigation routes are free and open to all the states engaged in peaceful international interactions. Among other objectives, to "promote a free and open Indo-Pacific" is a stated international objective of the U.S. government (National Security Strategy, 2022). The Biden administration adopted this strategic document, and the Trump White House is unlikely to transfer its focus away from the People's Republic of China and its potentially aggressive intentions. In contrast, the PRC faces long-term demographic and resource availability problems. The PRC has a large population, and its economy will soon be the largest in the world. The larger its economy grows, the more natural and material resources it needs to provide for its population adequately (Xu, et. al., 2023). The PRC's long-term interest is to enclose its surrounding geographic space under its exclusive control as much as possible.

Pax Americana, a world order led by the United States, is based on America's ability to keep the lines of transportation and communication for world commerce free and fair. The United States' commitment to free global trade is mainly responsible for international rules and norms that created prosperity and well-being for hundreds of millions of people worldwide, including in parts of the world that were economically marginalized or oppressed in recent centuries. The latter includes Southeast Asia, which currently experiences heavy pressure from the rulers of communist China (Kwon, 2020). Beijing is trying to annex nearly the entire South China Sea, essentially making it the internal waters of the People's Republic of China. It is an attempt to grab parts of the global commons that historically provided essential resources for the nations surrounding it and has served as a venue for bustling shipping lanes.

The world population is growing, and so is the global economic base for economic production. At the same time, Earth's resources are diminishing – the planet has a carrying capacity ceiling. The planet's natural resources cannot sustain infinite population and

economic growth (UNEP, 2019). This means growing competition for diminishing resources that may become very stressful already in the second half of this century, especially for more populous countries (Moriarty and Honnery, 2011). Some states' leaders might feel that they would better serve the long-term interests of their countries if they were to corner off parts of the world for themselves. Evidently, the leadership of the People's Republic of China is among those who are willing to employ their newly found wealth and prosperity for such parochial objectives. The PRC leadership is building its national capabilities deliberately and gradually to meet what they see as upcoming challenges and counter potential adversaries in the looming competition for resources.

The United States has employed its global sea sailing capability to secure freedom of navigation and access to shipping lanes and world resources for all nations willing to observe the established rules and respect others in the world community. The American Navy achieves a variety of objectives, among them providing freedom of navigation through the South China Sea through campaigning periodically in the areas claimed by China. Such campaigns create minor irritations for the Chinese leadership, while China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) continues its power demonstration operations in the South China Sea, primarily directed at its smaller neighbors. Simultaneously, Beijing keeps building its naval capabilities, aiming to outpace and out-skill the United States with its naval might (Palmer et. al., 2024).

2. CHINA'S STRATEGIC CULTURE

Historically, the Chinese state grew in its immediate neighborhood by Sinicizing its neighboring nations, including those peoples that conquered China, subjugating smaller peoples, and treating less powerful neighbors as "tributary states." However, Chinese expansionism on the land reached its limits by the late 18th century. Before reaching its natural expansion on land; however, the rulers of China abandoned the idea of seaward expansion. Not only seaward expansion but exploration by sea and seeking sea routes of trade became a taboo – a political prohibition motivated by China's internal ideological reasons. By 1525, China's "treasure fleet" was effectively destroyed: Admiral Zheng He's maritime logs were burned, while the treasure ships were deliberately neglected and left unrepaired to prevent their future use (Bergreen and Frey, 2021). China paid a price for this move in the 19th century when European imperialists reached its shores. European,

specifically British naval power, was too much to handle, and the Middle Kingdom gradually fell under the influence of outside imperial forces.

China reemerged as an international power to be reckoned with in the second half of the 20th century under the leadership of its communist rulers. With the late 20th century policies of market liberalization and open doors for investments, Beijing reasserted its place in global politics and laid claim to the status of global power at par with the United States. In the second decade of the 21st century, the PRC started aggressively expanding into the South China Sea by building artificial islands and claiming sea reefs as its sovereign land. Presumably, this expansionist drive has been informed by the looming resource shortage. The PRC can expand into the South China Sea and subsequently to the Pacific Ocean areas that present themselves as convenient locations for artificial island-building and development. The PRC can use its considerable economic might, military power, and abundant labor resources to develop several such islands and claim their territorial waters under national jurisdiction with accompanying exclusive economic zones.

In the long run, the PRC can build the necessary naval, air, space, and cyber capabilities to dominate the newly acquired "territorial waters," while the strength of the navies campaigning in the region from elsewhere could eventually decrease. Once the regime in Beijing claims something as China's own, the stakes dramatically increase for it to make good on its claim. The credibility of the ruling Communist Party of China to both domestic and international audiences depends on its ability to defend China's own territory, including its territorial waters. This is especially relevant for the domestic audience since the ruling communist party's legitimacy rests on nothing else but on its real or perceived strength. Once constructed islands and surrounding waters are declared Chinese territory, the ruling party's capacity to walk its claims back under diplomatic pressure or symbolic movements of foreign armed forces would vanish. For now, Beijing's official line regarding the South China Sea is that parts of the region are "disputed."

The PRC could remain patient in pursuit of its long-term goals. If China's rulers decide to keep at their task and increase their stakes in the game gradually, it will not fight a direct conflict with the United States or any other foreign adversary unless it absolutely has to. Instead, its leadership will be inclined to pursue its goals through peaceful and indirect means that could bring significant rewards without resorting to costly military encounters.

This logic is very likely to hold even when the PRC manages to achieve a sizable military advantage over its global overseas peer competitor, the United States. At the same time, the PRC leadership should not have illusions about their potential opposition since the United States' National Defense Strategy identifies "strategic competition with the People's Republic of China" as "the most comprehensive and serious challenge to U.S. national security" (National Defense Strategy, 2022).

Chinese strategic culture has both similarities and differences with Western strategic culture. The similarities lie in the sphere of strategic means, i.e., its armaments and economic resources, and partially in its strategic ways, i.e., in its force organization and functions. This is not surprising because China owes its current military might to the adoption of Western military ways and means, which, among others, was fully endorsed by Mao Ze Dong. However, the military ends in Chinese strategic culture appear to be more diffused and perspectival than those defined in classical Western strategic literature. More specifically, the policy ends of military engagements in Chinese strategic culture should lead to an improved phase in the Chinese nation's historical development, ultimately leading to a "heavenly" state or communist society. The idea of rejuvenation and renewal through struggle continues to be on the current agenda of China's Communist Party (Xi, 2021).

Several important historical sources inform Chinese strategic culture. Sun Tzu has had a significant influence on military thinking in China, as do many of his ancient Chinese commentators. Further, Chinese strategic culture is influenced by traditional Confucian thinking. Finally, a vision of history has been championed by a Chinese version of Marxism-Leninism, specifically by Mao Ze Dong's reinterpretation of such key doctrinal concepts as nation, history, and war. The concept of continuous and permanent "struggle" is a defining feature of the Chinese communist movement (Xi, 2021). Even though well-known Chinese treatises on strategy do not specifically address maritime affairs, it could be inferred that in a country with many long-standing traditions, the logic of a strategy of gradual and deliberate expansion would apply to Beijing's planned conquest of the South China Sea.

From a PRC perspective, the current process of capturing the South China Sea by constructing artificial islands can continue through gradual and deliberate steps. Naval campaigns conducted by the U.S. and its allies, both local and overseas, represent minor

distractions that do not directly affect China's ongoing project. An old Eastern saying, "the dogs bark, but the caravan goes on," would apply to this case. However, there is always a chance that the dispute around the new artificial islands may turn into an actual military conflict.

The leadership of the PRC Communist Party positions itself as the only natural leader to unify "the entire party, the military, and the Chinese people" and to lead them through "grave, intricate international development and a series of immense risks and challenges" (Xi, 2022). The credibility of the Party and its ability to hold China together depends not only on its domestic economic success but also on its extraterritorial endeavors. No less is true for strong and charismatic leaders like Xi, who seek every opportunity to attach their names to their countries' real or imaginary grandeur.

In case of actual military conflict under the current conditions over the disputed maritime area around the South China Sea, the PRC should have some advantage for two principal reasons. China will be fighting close to its homeland – its logistic lines will not be overstretched or easily disrupted by its adversaries. On the other hand, the United States and its allies will rely on local support from those who are economically poorer and militarily underdeveloped for protracted naval or maritime warfare but have much to lose if Beijing prevails with its expansionist projects. The main reason the PRC could have the upper hand over the United States in a war over the disputed portions of the South China Sea is its ability and readiness to wage protracted wars. The Communist Party of China waged a successful protracted war against the Japanese occupation during World War II. The CPC came to power after a protracted war against the Chinese republican government and an assortment of regional warlords. Most importantly, Chinese society and state have much higher tolerance for massive combat casualties than do American society and its democratically elected government.

Mao's teachings on protracted war delivered during the Japanese occupation speak to the current instance of the disputed islands: "The question now is: Will China be subjugated? The answer is, No, she will not be subjugated, but will win final victory. Can China win quickly? The answer is, No, she cannot win quickly, and the War of Resistance will be a protracted war" (Mao, 1938). It should be noted that even though Mao's strategy of protracted conflict was effective in the mid-20th century, more recent developments in

military technology may well render it ineffective, especially when it comes to fighting over a maritime area. Capturing islands used to be one of the most difficult and dangerous tasks, but with the introduction of drone warfare guided by precision targeting and aided by autonomous robotic systems, successful defense of islands against protracted attacks is nearly impossible. If islands are small, their defense against drone warfare is simply hopeless.

Even though the Chinese build-up in the South China Sea directly contradicts American national interests and its role in the world, combined with China's growing military might, a direct military clash between the PRC and the USA is by no means unavoidable. A compromise solution could be found for this clash of interests, one of which may involve revisions to the international law of the seas. Specifically, a new concept of "historical waters/seas" could be introduced in the international legal code recognizing China's primacy over the disputed area but not its exclusive claims. Accordingly, the PRC will have principal claims over the disputed area of the seas but will allow for freedom of navigation and commerce. The resource rights of both the body of water and the seabed can be shared with the littoral states according to their population size in relation to that of China.

Similar compromises could be found in all other areas of the Sino-American disputes with the application of sufficiently strong political will and necessary diplomatic efforts. The most contentious and potentially explosive among these, the quarrel over Taiwan, could be addressed by revising the island nation's sovereignty by pooling and/or sharing it or granting Taiwan extra-territorial sovereignty or strong internal independence.

3. DETERRENCE OPTIONS

Military developments in the South China Sea are closely linked with those around Taiwan. The PRC cannot confidently use military force to capture Taiwan if it does not control the South China Sea. Admittedly, control of the sea is impossible without overwhelming sea power. However, even if the PRC manages to establish a dominant naval presence in the South China Sea, it will face impossible sustainment tasks without prepositioning a crucial amount of materiel and weapons on key islands. For this, Beijing will have to develop and equip islands accordingly. More crucially, it will have to expel adversarial forces from the islands that they control. The key country in this regard is the

Philippines, which controls Thitu Island -- the most strategically significant island in the South China Sea not owned but claimed by the PRC (McLaughlin, 2024).

The significance of Thitu Island in deterring the PRC's ambitions and intentions for the South China Sea cannot be underestimated. The Philippines is the key ally of the United States among the littoral states. Washington and Manila have a defense agreement since the 1950s (Treaty, 1951). Manila also has a stake in a free and open South China Sea rather than one controlled by Beijing. In the most realistic scenario, Beijing does not expect much resistance from other littoral states, which makes the Philippines a natural target of the aggressive intentions of the PRC Coast Guard and potentially its growing Navy. If Manila breaks under the pressure of the Chinese forces, other littoral states will be that much easier to convince that resistance to Chinese advances is futile.

One obvious method the PRC could use to pursue a hostile takeover of the South China Sea is a blockade. An act of war, the blockade might sound preferable and less costly since it does not involve immediate destruction and the drama of military action. However, blockading the South China Sea for the purpose of expelling the Philippines might backfire and cost Beijing dearly. By assuming a blockade posture, Beijing would essentially blockade itself: the PRC gets most of its oil exports from overseas sources, specifically the Middle East, and the shipments must go through or near the South China Sea. To defeat a PRC blockade, its opponents might succeed by blockading the PRC blockade forces to prevent the resupplies from reaching the Chinese mainland of its islands.

The maritime security of the South China Sea is complicated by the fact that the PRC, a rising superpower, seeks to dominate the area at the cost of the other littoral states. Beijing is increasing the People's Liberation Army's naval capabilities at a constant rate. There is the PRC's rapidly developing anti-ship warfare capabilities: "China's arsenal of anti-ship weapons is truly a force to be reckoned with, and is superior to that of the United States in many respects" (Filipoff, 2023). Further, China has significant submarine warfare capacities, currently numbering around sixty, with diesel-electric submarines representing the backbone of its submarine fleet. These submarines specialize in naval warfare, but they can also fire cruise missiles. China also has extensive aerial drone warfare capabilities. The South China Sea represents an area of about one thousand nautical miles from the Chinese coast, which could be easily covered by its drones. Although these drones are slow, they

can overwhelm any force by their sheer numbers and inflict extensive damage on anything within their reach. Finally, China has serious and rapidly developing electronic warfare means. The PRC forces can effectively spoof GPS signals and deny certain geographic areas for precision strikes. Although the PRC's electronic warfare capabilities are not 100 percent successful, they can reduce the allied force's precision strike effectiveness.

The United States and allied navies will do well to keep the adversary in an ambiguous cognitive state by not sending a clear message of their intentions in the South China Sea. This could be achieved by slowly and moderately building the presence of military force in the region. The slow and ambiguous change also imposes less cost on the United States by not committing and supporting an overwhelming force to the South China Sea since the force build-up will have to be maintained in the region for an extended period. The People's Republic of China is in the great power rebuilding game for the long run. In other words, it would be advantageous for the United States and its allies to keep the PRC's attention on the South China Sea without provoking it into a dramatic confrontation or letting it use this opportunity to attack elsewhere, e.g., Taiwan, a more substantial prize for China's communist party leadership.

However, protracted naval campaigning in the South China Sea with ambiguous and admittedly limited objectives presents its own disadvantages. The most obvious is the inability to dislodge the PRC forces clearly and decisively from their ongoing mission of building artificial islands and harassing littoral states. Further, the defense of those South China Sea islands not currently controlled by the PRC and/or its surrounding areas will remain a problematic task – a substantial challenge for the Philippines and a continuous headache for its key ally, the United States. A slow and gradual build-up of forces in defense of the Philippines is not likely to convince the PRC to let up its pressure from this country in any substantial way or to change its current practices in the South China Sea.

Another design of campaigns in the South China Sea could be pursued by periodically building a massive force in the region. This approach would allow the allies to seize the initiative from the PRC, at least for the periods for which a massive build-up of the forces could be maintained. The presence of mass forces presents clear advantages in achieving superior forces in the South China Sea, and as a result, it deters the PRC's aggression and harassment toward littoral states, specifically toward the Philippines. At the same time, this

campaign design carries significant disadvantages. Specifically, disadvantages are to be found in its propensity to create a security dilemma for the PRC: by building a large military force in the South China Sea, the United States effectively secures the Philippines, but at the same, it inadvertently creates profound insecurity for the PRC. As a result, it should be anticipated that the PRC will not stay idle but instead will be compelled to respond in some way that would take the initiative from the United States or, at the very least, neutralize the newly developed insecurity at its borders. It follows that the PRC would attack the U.S. and allied forces in the South China Sea, which could initiate a slowly escalating and protracted regional war. Alternatively, the PRC could use a diversion directed at the South China Sea force and attack elsewhere, e.g., launch an invasion of Taiwan. A massive force build-up in the South China Sea will reduce the availability of American forces elsewhere in the INDOPACOM area of responsibility. Even though Taiwan is not too far from the South China Sea, a PRC invasion force may only need a few days' lead time to make the battle for the island tremendously unappealing for the U.S. and allied forces.

4. CONCLUSION

The United States Navy continues campaigning in and around the South China Sea to secure freedom of worldwide commerce and navigation. This campaign is in response to the People's Republic of China's large-scale campaign and attempts of maritime conquest as Beijing continues to build islands in the South China Sea with an explicit intent of incorporating this sea, currently part of the international commons, under its territorial control. China's Navy maintains deployments on the disputed islands, while the Coast Guard continues to harass civilian vessels of other littoral states, specifically targeting those from the Philippines. Such disputes could be resolved through peaceful means; however, if Beijing were to attack the Philippines, the United States would be obligated to respond as Washington and Manila have had a Mutual Defense Treaty since 1951.

Maritime campaigns in the South China Sea carry unavoidable risks, but it appears that the risks will be higher if the United States does not respond to the PRC's aggressive moves and instead lets Beijing have its way with smaller neighbors. The campaigns carried out by the United States Navy in response to the People's Liberation Army's Navy are accompanied by a security dilemma that may lead to an open conflict between the USA and the PRC. However, limited troop presence by the United States, accompanied by a build-up

of drone warfare capabilities in the region, should accomplish the objective of deterring China's aggressive moves. The United States and allied forces could support protracted campaigns with limited troop presence better and at a lower cost. Significant drone assets should convince the PLA of the futility of defending their newly built small islands and dissuade them from trying to capture new ones. This strategy would also avoid provoking the Chinese leadership into an escalation or a dramatic response.

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