

Military Build Up in the South China Sea*

By Derek Grossman

Introduction

Since China announced its expansive sovereignty claims in the South China Sea (SCS) in 2009, the region has become steadily militarized as Beijing seeks to legitimize and defend its claims. Other key maritime counter claimants within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), including most notably Vietnam, but also Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, have sought to modernize their naval and coast guard capabilities to preserve the status quo in the SCS. Their improvements, however, have been decidedly miniscule in comparison to Beijing's dramatic military upgrades. Indeed, only Vietnam stands apart from its ASEAN brethren in the depth and breadth of its military modernization to offset China's growing military footprint. Even so, Hanoi remains a very distant second to China. Taiwan—considered by Beijing to be a renegade province of China—has also been quietly upgrading its military infrastructure in the SCS. And major powers outside of the region, including Australia, France, India, Japan, the UK, and the US, are heightening their military presence in the SCS, though without installing permanent military structures to rival China's expansion. Their activities take the form of periodic joint exercises, freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs), or both to uphold international law and rules of behaviour.

This chapter will demonstrate that when considering force build-up in the SCS, China has been the most active by all reasonable indicators such as quantity and quality of weapons deployed, land reclaimed, and military facilities constructed or upgraded on disputed outposts. As Dr. Alexander L. Vuving has noted, describing the situation in the SCS as a

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regional “arms race” is simply inaccurate.¹ For it to truly be a race, there would have to be some measure of competition and there is virtually none. China’s outsized military might has contributed to its growing confidence to act assertively in the region against ASEAN maritime counter claimants, such as Vietnam in 2019 at Vanguard Bank or the Philippines in 2012 at Scarborough Shoal. Thus, going forward, ASEAN claimants will either have to step up their military modernization efforts to exploit Chinese vulnerabilities, prioritize partnering with major powers external to the region to improve their ability to balance China, or preferably do both. Otherwise, Beijing will continue to dominate—and perhaps one day attempt to severely limit access to—these vital strategic waterways to the detriment of everyone else.

China’s Militarization of the South China Sea

Starting in 2009, Beijing has sought to legitimize and secure its disputed territorial claims in the SCS. In pursuit of these objectives, China has engaged in a multi-pronged sea control strategy comprised of upgrading or building new military facilities on its outposts in the Paracel and Spratly islands as well as conducting exercises and sovereignty patrols of the disputed region. To date, Beijing is yet to permanently deploy People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) or People’s Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) forces to these forward operating bases. But given the breathless advances in Chinese militarization of the SCS over the last nine years, doing so seems inevitable and raises concerns amongst senior US military leaders. In April 2018, for example, the then-incoming Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) Commander Admiral Philip Davidson noted in Congressional testimony that “once occupied [by PLA forces], China will be able to extend its influence thousands of miles to the south and project power deep into Oceania,” threatening traditionally secure US sea-lines of communication.² Admiral Davis further offered that the PLA will be able to use

these bases to challenge [the] U.S. presence in the region, and any forces deployed to the islands would easily overwhelm the military forces of any other SCS claimants. In short, China is now capable of controlling the SCS in all scenarios short of war with the United States.

For the time being, Beijing has fortified multiple forward operating bases with anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs) and surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) along with underground storage facilities, hangars, radars, and sensor arrays.³ In late June 2019, Beijing conducted anti-ship ballistic missile (ASBM) tests in the vicinity near the disputed Spratly islands to showcase the Chinese military's growing counter-intervention capabilities to deter the U.S. and its allies.⁴ China conducted major dredging operations between 2013 and 2017 at many of its SCS outposts. By deepening port facilities, Beijing can now berth deeper draft ships at these new bases, such as those responsible for resupply and maintenance as well as intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) missions.⁵ Land reclamation from dredging has also produced at least 3,200 acres of new land in the Spratlys (as well as hundreds of additional acres in the Paracels), clearing the way for construction of air strips on three of the seven Beijing-controlled Spratly Island features, including on Fiery, Mischief, and Subi reefs.⁶ On Woody Island in the Paracel Islands, which is the largest of 20 features controlled by China and disputed with Vietnam in the island chain, Beijing benefits from a decades-old airport. It completed runway extension work there in 2014 to accommodate military aircraft.⁷ Beijing in 2016 also deployed HQ-9 missile defence batteries to Woody Island, though it is unclear whether they remain in place today or are deployed on a rotational basis.⁸ Regardless, these deployments and upgrades across the SCS have significantly enhanced PLA power projection against regional adversaries.

If ever faced with armed conflict in the SCS, China has significant naval, marine, coast guard, and maritime militia forces to bring to bear. According to the US Department of

Defense, the PLAN is the largest navy in the Indo-Pacific, featuring at least 300 ships along with numerous submarines, amphibious ships, patrol craft, and specialized ships.⁹ The Pentagon further notes that the PLA command in charge of SCS operations, known as the Southern Theatre Navy, maintains in its inventory four nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBN), two nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSN), 16 diesel-powered attack submarines, 11 destroyers (DDG), 19 frigates (FFG), 11 corvettes (FFL), three amphibious transport docks (LPD), ten tank landing ships (LST), nine medium landing ships, and 24 missile patrol craft.¹⁰ PLAN modernization also encompasses the deployment of a diverse array of anti-access/area denial (A2AD) capabilities such as ASCMs, ASBMs, land-attack cruise missiles (LACMs), and mines as well as accompanying ISR support technologies.

China's first aircraft carrier, the *Liaoning*, has been the object of intense media scrutiny in recent years. A conventionally powered ex-Ukrainian carrier with a ski jump runway configuration, *Liaoning* has conducted multiple deployments to the SCS since becoming operational in 2012. In April 2018, the *Liaoning* participated as part of at least 40 surface ships in live-fire exercises in the SCS.¹¹ Beijing in January 2017 claimed it launched J-15 Flying Shark fighters from *Liaoning's* deck.¹² China is further reportedly conducting sea trials for its second carrier, which may join the fleet as soon as 2019, and is constructing a third carrier to be completed by late 2020—with additional carrier construction likely in the coming years.¹³ The Pentagon notes that the PLAN is actively constructing other smaller surface combatants, including DDGs, FFGs, and FFLs that the South Sea Fleet that “will provide a significant upgrade to the PLAN's air defence, anti-ship, and anti-submarine capabilities.”¹⁴ In particular, having more and modern FFLs on hand and outfitted with towed array sonar should enhance the PLAN's ability to conduct effective anti-submarine warfare (ASW) operations—considered an acute vulnerability for the PLAN, especially against the

United States.¹⁵ The PLAN is also putting an emphasis on improving its amphibious warfare ships as well as associated armour vehicles and helicopters.¹⁶ Although mostly to augment its expeditionary capabilities, Beijing has recently expanded its PLAN Marine Corps (PLANMC) from 10,000 to 30,000 personnel that can certainly contribute to the amphibious forces it can project into the SCS.¹⁷ Finally, Beijing operates dozens of attack submarines capable of launching a variety of ASCMs against targets with little to no notice.¹⁸ Although China's submarines—especially their diesel-powered ones, which constitutes the majority of its fleet—are notoriously noisy and thus easily discoverable, the PLAN is actively enhancing the quietness of these boats to avoid detection.¹⁹ According to a recent Chinese military journal article, the South Sea Fleet is now able to immediately deploy the fleet's submarines to address contingencies in the region.²⁰

The China Coast Guard (CCG) is another highly formidable force that Beijing has deployed to enforce its SCS sovereignty claims. Originally established in 2013 as a civilian-run law enforcement agency, the CCG as of March 2018 was officially transferred from being a civilian to military-run organization—likely holding significant implications for rules of engagement against maritime counter claimants.²¹ Beijing's coast guard fleet is at least 190,000 tons, making it by far the largest coast guard force in terms of tonnage in the region and in the world.²² As of May 2019, the Pentagon estimated that the CCG was comprised of more than 130 ships (at one thousand tons displacement or greater), more than 70 fast patrol combatants (at 500 tons or greater), 400 coastal patrol craft, and approximately 1,000 inshore and riverine vessels.²³ The Pentagon further assesses that the majority of newer CCG ships are outfitted with helicopter facilities, high-capacity water cannons, and guns ranging from 30 to 76mm, and that it is likely to add another 25-30 patrol ships by the end of 2020.²⁴ Beijing has stated that the CCG enlists at least 17,000 personnel, though this may be a conservative estimate according to my RAND colleague Lyle Morris, and most officers carry light arms.²⁵

In addition to CCG, for years the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM) has served as Beijing's "third sea force."²⁶ Described by the Pentagon as a subset of China's national militia, the PAFMM mobilizes armed reserve forces of civilians to pressure counter claimants.²⁷ The Department of Defense notes that PAFMM has played a critical coercive role in all major SCS clashes in recent years, including harassment of the USNS Impeccable in 2009 as well as the Scarborough Reef and *Haiyang Shiyou-981* oil rig standoffs in 2012 and 2014 respectively.²⁸ Although not publicly acknowledged by Beijing, PAFMM does indeed fall under the PLA's chain of command.

Going forward, the CCG and PAFMM will almost certainly remain at the forefront of armed clashes in the SCS. According to one US think tank estimate, from 2010 to 2016 there were 45 major SCS incidents, of which 71% involved at least one CCG or maritime law enforcement (MLE) vessel.²⁹ This is because the CCG gives Beijing a less risky way to enforce its claims and adds another layer of engagement before an escalation in conflict to the PLAN is required. Commonly referred to as "gray zone" tactics, Beijing understands the benefits of this subtler approach, and has sought to use non-military means as well, most notably by relying on its deep-sea fishing fleet—now the world's largest—to establish a de facto presence in disputed areas.³⁰

Finally, the PLA Naval Aviation and PLAAF are increasing their activities in the SCS. China's has flown numerous H-6K bomber flights throughout the region, and in May, landed one for the first time at Woody Island.³¹ Beyond the obvious symbolism of the event, the PLAAF demonstrated that these runways will assist in extending the range of its power projection capabilities in a military conflict. Beijing has also repeatedly landed J-10 and J-11 fighter aircraft on Woody Island.³² Notably, China is yet to land either bombers or fighter aircraft on its Spratly possessions (though it has landed a Y-8 military transport plane), but

this seems inevitable. In addition, the hangars China has constructed at Fiery Cross, Mischief, and Subi reefs are identical to facilities on Woody Island.³³

Vietnam's Response

The Vietnam People's Army (VPA) has responded to China's militarization of the SCS by procuring offsetting and retaliatory capabilities. For example, the VPA is building A2AD capabilities that currently includes six Russian-built *Kilo*-class submarines along with a complementary network of anti-access missiles. Most notably, Russian-built Bastion-P shore-based ASCMs seek to guarantee that PLAN and PLAAF operations within Vietnam's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) would encounter lethal and heavy resistance in the event of an attack. The VPA has also procured systems capable of close naval encounters, such as the Russian-built *Gepard*-class frigates and *Tarantul V (Molniya)* class corvettes. In the air domain, the VPA has modernized its fleet with Sukhoi Su-30MK2 multirole aircraft, which have the range to strike targets throughout the SCS as well as on the Chinese mainland. Vietnam has also greatly expanded its Vietnam Coast Guard (VCG) presence, now fielding the second largest regional force which is larger than those of the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia combined. These paramilitary maritime vessels are lightly armed with deck-mounted gun turrets and crew members carrying firearms to conduct maritime law-enforcement activities as well as tactical reconnaissance and maritime surveillance in the SCS.³⁴ Hanoi is separately building up its civilian-led Vietnam Fisheries Surveillance Force (VFSF) to rival China's PAFMM. While primarily serving in a constabulary role, these forces can also quickly and expensively "flood the zone" of a potential maritime standoff. They are reportedly armed with machine guns and explosives to augment the VCG's capabilities.³⁵ By fielding these capabilities, Vietnam has probably achieved its core objective, which is to demonstrate the ability to inflict great harm against PLA forces in order

to deter China from initiating a confrontation in the first place.³⁶ If Beijing does so anyway, then Hanoi likely plans to carry out a spectacular attack—for example, sinking a PLAN surface ship with a torpedo launched from one of its submarines—to convince Beijing to back down and return to the status quo ante as quickly as possible. It is less certain, however, that Vietnam is sufficiently prepared to confront China in a broader, high-intensity conflict lasting months.

Finally, Vietnam is conducting some land reclamation at outposts in the region. Hanoi, for example, has expanded some infrastructure and dredged the northern channel at Ladd Reef.³⁷ Vietnam has also reportedly militarized some of the SCS features under its control. In August 2016, Vietnam apparently deployed Israeli-built Extended Range Artillery (EXTRA) guided rocket artillery launchers on several of the disputed features it controls.³⁸ These systems have sufficient range to destroy Chinese military infrastructure throughout the Spratly Islands. By November 2016, Vietnam had also extended its sole runway in the Spratly Islands—on Spratly Island itself—and built a new aircraft hangar there.³⁹

Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines' Responses

Although not technically a counter claimant in SCS disputes, Indonesia in recent years has increasingly felt pressured by Chinese fishing incursions north of the Natuna Islands. As such, Jakarta in July 2017 controversially renamed the waters north of the Natuna Islands the “North Natuna Sea” to emphasize Indonesian interests in keeping the peace within its EEZ that intersects with Beijing’s “nine-dash line” territorial claims.⁴⁰ In addition, Indonesia under President Joko Widodo has pursued military modernization commensurate with turning Indonesia into a “global maritime axis (or fulcrum).”⁴¹ He has called for the establishment of a “Minimum Essential Force” by 2024 that would ensure Indonesia has the requisite naval, air, and maritime capabilities to defend its claims and conduct other

missions.⁴² Progress thus far, however, has been slow and difficult for a variety of reasons, including a limited defence budget, focus on land rather than maritime security, and bureaucratic wrangling—especially in the sea domain between the Indonesian Navy and many disparate government organizations responsible for maritime security.⁴³ Nevertheless, Jakarta at the end of 2018 opened a new military base at Natuna Besar Island off the coast of Borneo near the southern tip of China’s claims in the SCS, ostensibly to challenge Beijing, though there is debate on this point.⁴⁴ Regardless, Indonesia now fields three modernized *Nagapasa*-class attack submarines.⁴⁵ It has further been attempting to retire its outdated *Ahmad Yani*-class frigates in favor of more modern *Martadinata*-class guided missile frigates, but this process has been delayed.⁴⁶ Despite numerous fishermen clashes with China and others in the SCS, Indonesia only in the summer of 2019 consolidated its coast guard to focus on these challenges.⁴⁷ In the air domain, Indonesia maintains Su-30MK2 multirole aircraft and it hopes to acquire Su-35 fighters in spite of possible US sanctions to make up for maintenance problems with its F-16s and inability to buy the F-15.⁴⁸ Jakarta has further acquired Kongsberg Norwegian advanced SAM system (NASAMS), a medium-range air defence system, as well as the Oerlikon Skyshield system—a shorter range SAM system that protects mainland Indonesia, but that could eventually be deployed to Natuna Island.⁴⁹

At least outwardly, Malaysia had not expressed much concern over China’s SCS claims until Beijing in 2013 conducted a military exercise at James Shoal and the CCG began to patrol South Luconia Shoal—both disputed features.⁵⁰ Since then, Kuala Lumpur has sought to modernize its aging naval fleet, such as the acquisition of large (3,100 ton displacement) littoral combat ships (LCS), with the first of six arriving in 2019 and the last in 2023.⁵¹ Despite the leadership transition from Razak Najib to Mahathir Bin Mohamad, Kuala Lumpur has continued to work in collaboration with China to procure four littoral mission ships (LMS)—the first two of which it received in April 2019, and the next two arriving by

2021.⁵² Malaysia's coast guard as of 2017 was slated to grow by 62% in tonnage and 11% in the number of ships over the ten year period between 2008 and 2018. Total tonnage by the end of 2018 was slated to number approximately 12,900 tons, with new patrol craft as part of the fleet.⁵³ Finally, in the air, Malaysia is looking to retire its MiG-29N with new multirole fighter aircraft, but the process has been slow due to budget constraints, and there does not appear to be a viable replacement at this time.⁵⁴

Even though Filipino concerns were heightened following China's takeover of the disputed Scarborough Shoal in 2012, and Manila brought and won an international arbitration case against Beijing in the SCS, it continues to lack virtually any power projection capability into the SCS. Other than the acquisition of two former US coast guard *Hamilton*-class cutters that have been reclassified as frigates along with two new South Korean frigates and one former corvette, the vast majority of the Philippines Navy is comprised of ships that range from four decades old to Second World War era commissioning.⁵⁵ Manila has shown interest in modernizing its navy, laying out an ambitious Strategic Sail Plan 2020 to procure new frigates, corvettes, offshore vessels, maritime patrol aircraft, patrol gunboats, strategic sealift vessels, diesel-electric submarines, and many other new assets.⁵⁶ To date, however, there has been little progress on these initiatives. Indeed, although Manila used to have the strongest navy coming out of the Second World War, according to Philippine Navy chief Robert Empedrad, it now is "one of the weakest (navies), even in the Southeast Asian region."⁵⁷ Manila similarly has ambitious plans for the coast guard, though there it has probably been more successful. In October 2016, for example, the Philippines started acquiring the first of ten multi-role response vessels (MRRVs) with funding assistance from Japan.⁵⁸ Manila has further purchased from France one large offshore patrol vessel and four fast patrol boats, among other modernization programs.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, its Flight Plan 2028 for air force modernization envisions procurement of multirole fighters for air superiority missions.

However, at present, the Philippines has very limited combat-capable aircraft in its fleet. Indeed, with the retirement of the F-5 in 2005, the Philippines did not have a viable replacement and became effectively combat-incapable for ten years until, in 2015, it acquired two light attack aircraft.⁶⁰

Australia, India, Japan, and the U.S (or “Quad”) Responses

There are several key extra-regional powers with security interests in the SCS dispute. Four of these—including Australia, India, Japan, and the US—are members of the so-called Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or “Quad” talks.⁶¹ The Quad is an informal dialogue to quietly coordinate security and military policy, with China in mind, the existence of which simultaneously signals that the group plans to balance against Chinese claims in the SCS and elsewhere throughout the Indo-Pacific region.⁶² The Quad has met five times since November 2017. However, the Quad has refrained from conducting joint patrols or exercises, as it did during its first iteration in 2007. The Quad collapsed back then due to domestic political forces within each of the Quad member countries. Thus, the future of this reincarnation is unclear. Regardless, each Quad member conducts their own robust defence engagement of the region on a bilateral basis, and with each other. Australia’s BERSAMA LIMA 18, for example, has been described by the Australian Department of Defence as being “a multinational response to a regional security threat.” It included Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, and the UK—members of the so-called Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA).⁶³ In general, Australia has favoured exercises to demonstrate its resolve in the SCS. Unlike the US Navy, Canberra resists conducting FONOPs and is yet to fly or sail within 12 nautical miles of claims Chinese features.⁶⁴ The US continues to try to convince its long-time ally to participate in FONOPs, but to date, this has not happened.⁶⁵

In recent years, India has sought to heighten its military role in the SCS through its formerly “Look East” policy and now “Act East” policy. Although seemingly ambivalent about its Quad membership, New Delhi has nevertheless made remarkable strides to bolster defence relations with the other members as well as with key ASEAN counter claimants.⁶⁶ India, for example, is part of a new India-Australia-Indonesia trilateral security dialogue.⁶⁷ Regarding ASEAN bilateral relationships, India in May 2018 dispatched warships to Vietnam and, for apparently the first time ever, conducted a joint exercise with it in the SCS.⁶⁸ The two sides have apparently reached an understanding of the importance of maintaining a “free and open” Indo-Pacific and have correspondingly deepened their already robust defence cooperation.⁶⁹ During his keynote address at the annual Shangri-La Dialogue meeting in June 2018, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi underscored the importance of ASEAN centrality toward maintaining peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific. New Delhi has followed up by conducting joint exercises with Indonesia as well as pushing for trilateral India-Singapore-Thailand exercises in the future.⁷⁰ New Delhi’s connectivity to Indonesia is particularly interesting as it struck a deal to develop Jakarta’s strategic Sabang port, on the tip of Sumatra, presumably to counter Chinese port access deals in the region.⁷¹

A more forward-leaning Japan under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has also increased the visibility of its presence in the SCS. Over the summer in 2019, Japan deployed its *Izumo*-class helicopter carrier—its largest ship—along with two frigates to participate in exercises with the US in the SCS.⁷² Similarly, in the summer of 2018, Japan sent the helicopter carrier and a flotilla of battle ships including destroyers through the SCS, with the goal of stabilizing the region.⁷³ In May 2017, Tokyo conducted a passing exercise (PASSEX) with the US in the SCS, designed to bolster interoperability and secure communications.⁷⁴ Japan in October 2018 conducted joint military exercises with the US and Philippines only 250 kilometres across from the disputed Scarborough Shoal.⁷⁵ Japan also made its first-ever submarine port

call to Vietnam in mid-September 2018, and Hanoi the following week made a return frigate visit to Japan in a sign of strengthening defence ties.⁷⁶

Finally, the US has sought to balance Beijing in the SCS through exercises and stepped up FONOPs. In a dangerous incident in early October 2018, the *USS Decatur*, which was conducting a FONOP, was tailed by a PLAN *Luyang*-class destroyer that closed within 45 yards of the *Decatur*.⁷⁷ An informal tabulation of FONOPs suggest that these activities are on the rise since 2015, and US military commanders have consistently said that the US will continue to challenge Chinese sovereignty claims in the SCS.⁷⁸ In August 2018, for instance, the US Navy on Twitter commented that “we will sail, fly and operate wherever international law allows.”⁷⁹ As such, the US Air Force also routinely flies through the region to uphold international law. In late September 2018, the US flew B-52H Stratofortress bombers in a show of force.⁸⁰ Apart from FONOPs, the US also plans to continue holding military exercises in the region to challenge Beijing’s claims.⁸¹ In August 2018, for example, the US Navy and Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Forces (JMSDF) practiced formation sailing and manoeuvring.⁸² Washington has also tried to revive the Quad to find ways of quietly balancing China, and has strengthened defence and maritime security ties with key US allies and partners in the region. For his first trip as Secretary of Defense, Mark Esper in August 2019 visited the Indo-Pacific region to shore up alliance ties with Australia and Japan. Washington seems to be doing the same with other allies and partners as well. Despite the Philippines’ apparent drift away from its alliance with the US since Filipino President Rodrigo Duterte came to power in 2016, recent military exercises and working-level discussions appear to have bilateral defence ties firmly intact.⁸³ The US for the first time since the end of the Vietnam War sent an aircraft carrier, the *USS Carl Vinson*, to Da Nang in a highly symbolic demonstration of the growing closeness of US-Vietnam relations.⁸⁴ Then-Secretary of Defense James Mattis referred to Washington and Hanoi as “like-minded

partners” in the SCS, suggesting ties will continue to ramp up.⁸⁵ In August 2018, Mattis also hosted his Indonesian and Malaysian counterparts recently at the Pentagon.⁸⁶

Others Respond Too

There are other countries that are playing a military role in the SCS as well. One within the region is Taiwan. Because of its frayed relationship with China, which claims ownership of Taiwan, Taipei has assiduously avoided unnecessarily antagonizing Beijing by not challenging its extraordinary claims.⁸⁷ Nevertheless, Taipei in recent years has sought to bolster its military presence in the SCS, particularly on Itu Aba (also commonly known as Taiping Island)—the largest natural island in the Spratly archipelago. In 2012, for example, Taiwan completed a runway extension project there, enabling C-130 Hercules military transport planes to access the island.⁸⁸ Taiwan also likely put in place anti-aircraft artillery and tried to mask its activities by blurring Google Earth images of the island.⁸⁹ Finally, Taiwan routinely conducts military exercises off Itu Aba, whether to deter counter claimants or to practice search and rescue operations. A live-fire exercise in August 2017 prompted a stern rebuke, not from China, but from Vietnam, which also disputes Itu Aba along with the Philippines. For its part, Taiwan said it will continue to uphold its sovereignty there.⁹⁰

Other Western countries, including the UK and France, have participated in numerous FONOPs to challenge Chinese claims in the SCS. In late August 2018, for example, the British Royal Navy’s HMS *Albion* tested Beijing’s claims to the Paracel Islands.⁹¹ London is reportedly considering plans to dispatch the HMS *Queen Elizabeth* aircraft carrier to the region in 2020 to support Australian operations.⁹² The UK and the US in January 2019 also held joint exercises in the SCS.⁹³ Meanwhile, the UK along with France in June 2018 conducted joint FONOPs near all three of China’s Spratly Island possessions, including at

Fiery Cross, Mischief, and Subi reefs.⁹⁴ France appears to have sailed at least five ships through the SCS in 2017.⁹⁵

From a broader perspective, Admiral Davidson, Commander of US INDOPACOM, said in February 2019: “We’ve had allies and partners in the region — the U.K., Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, France, all in one form or another step up their operations in the SCS, and I think that shows the international community’s willingness to push back.”⁹⁶

Concluding Thoughts

Considering the above analysis, there are at least three major points that can be inferred going forward. First, when compared to SCS counter claimants, China’s militarization of the region is without parallel, and therefore begs the question: What will be Beijing’s likely next steps? Some of these points are obvious, perhaps others less so. For instance, it is very likely China will eventually land fighter aircraft on Spratly Island possessions and potentially store them in the newly-built hangars now available there. If this occurs, then it would be the clearest sign yet of Chinese militarization of the SCS—in clear contravention of Chinese President Xi Jinping’s pledge to the US in 2015 not to militarize the Spratly archipelago.⁹⁷ Additional logical steps for Beijing include increased air and sea patrols, using not only conventional PLAAF and PLAN assets, but CCG and PAFMM forces as well. It is less clear whether China would implement a long-rumoured SCS air defence identification zone (ADIZ) to complement Beijing’s ADIZ established in 2013 over the East China Sea in the heat of the Senkaku/Diaoyu island dispute with Japan.⁹⁸ However, the SCS is many times larger than the East China Sea and therefore would probably require continuous coverage in greater numbers of patrol assets than China has available now. Even in the case of the much smaller East China Sea region, Beijing is either unwilling or unable to enforce the ADIZ to address every unauthorized incursion.⁹⁹

Second, other than Vietnam, ASEAN counter claimant states have not developed the A2AD capabilities one might hope for to complicate future Chinese land grabs or expanding its de facto control in the region as it did at Scarborough Shoal in 2012. Countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines should consider acquiring these capabilities—particularly ASCMs, SAMs, and modern submarines—by developing closer relations with the US and other major powers that might supply them with arms, including Russia. They would have to increase their defence spending levels to accommodate these new arms, which, as we have seen, would be extremely difficult. Outside of A2AD capabilities, ASEAN counter claimants should consider the high value of coast guards to operate in gray zones. Indonesia’s recent coast guard consolidation should be applauded. On the naval side, modern frigates, besides the combat benefits, can conduct maritime domain awareness (MDA) functions in conjunction with other air and naval assets, such as submarines and surveillance drones, to improve counter claimants’ understanding of Chinese activities. ASEAN states would greatly benefit from a common operating picture, derived from shared MDA data.

Third, and finally, the Quad, along with other major powers, should conduct FONOPs to enforce international law and norms of behaviour. They should also proceed with joint exercises to underscore deterrence and resolve. However, the Quad, without any ASEAN countries included, gives the impression that major powers are working in concert to “contain” China and pursue great power rivalry rather than enforce international law and norms of behaviour. Therefore, integrating at least one ASEAN state—even if not a party to the SCS dispute—would be helpful. During the first iteration of the Quad in 2007, the mechanism hosted a joint naval exercise with Singapore as a plus one. Furthermore, recent interest from the UK and France in FONOPs should be approached delicately. The dark history of European imperialism and colonialism in the region could provoke a backlash if these actions are not properly calibrated to address China’s excessive claims in the SCS—and

only this issue. In general, however, the region and Quad should welcome these and other countries that might be interested to reinforce international concerns over China's behaviour.

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