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China's Militarisation of the South China Sea: Creating a Strategic Strait?

By Richard A. Bitzinger

Synopsis

China continues to up the ante in the South China Sea (SCS), by moving more military and paramilitary forces into the area. The apparent objective is to turn the SCS into a Chinese-controlled waterway and strategic chokepoint.

Commentary

It HAS become increasingly evident that China intends to make the South China Sea (SCS) a Chinese lake, subject to its "indisputable sovereignty". However, the issue of Chinese hegemony in the SCS is less and less about economics – oil and gas reserves, or fishing rights – and increasingly about the militarisation of this body of water. The South China Sea is becoming a key defensive zone for China.

This can be seen in a number of recent activities. The first of these is the ratcheting up of activities by China's "militarised fisherman," the so-called "little blue men" who go out in the SCS and clash with ships from other nations, both commercial and naval. These are not simply private fishermen engaged in "patriotic activities". On the contrary, according to researchers at the US Naval War College (NWC), these vessels are in fact a maritime militia subsidised by Beijing and effectively a part-time military organisation.

Militarised Islands and 3Ds Strategy

These boats are sent out to collect intelligence, show the flag, and promote sovereignty claims. Moreover, they are not above creating minor clashes with other ships, as they provide Chinese naval and paramilitary forces, particularly the Chinese Coast Guard, with a pretext (protecting Chinese "civilians") to intervene and

thereby bolster China's military presence in the SCS. While this maritime militia has been around for decades, researchers at the NWC point out that it has become a much more active and aggressive force, and one that has a growing strategic purpose, what has been dubbed the "3Ds" of China's SCS strategy: *declare* (Chinese claims), *deny* (other countries' claims), and *defend* (those claims).

At the same time, China's aggressive artificial island-building programme that has taken place in the Spratlys over the last few years is apparently entering a second phase: the full-scale militarisation of Chinese possessions in the SCS. This includes building runways and aircraft hangars on several of these islets, emplacing radar stations, and even temporarily moving weapons (such as artillery pieces) to these islands.

More importantly, Woody Island, one of China's largest possessions in the SCS, has experienced a dramatic military expansion in recent years. Its 2700-metre runway can accommodate most Chinese fighter jets (in fact, Chinese Air Force J-11B fighters were recently spotted on the island). It has improved its harbour, and in early 2016 it was reported that long-range surface-to-air missiles were deployed to the island.

Chinese Aircraft Carriers

The third factor in this mix is China's growing fleet of aircraft carriers. At the moment, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has just one carrier, the ex-Russian *Varyag*, refurbished and renamed the *Liaoning*. While the *Liaoning* is basically a training ship and has not yet been used for actual military operations, it is an important precursor of things to come. China is already at work on a second, indigenous carrier, believed to be essentially a reverse-engineered version of the *Liaoning*.

This, of course, has its own limitations. The *Liaoning* uses a ski-jump for takeoff, instead of a steam catapult like American aircraft carriers; this greatly reduces the number of aircraft that can be deployed on a carrier, and also severely limits the usefulness of the aircraft itself: the plane has to hold so much fuel that it is almost literally a flying fuel tank, unable to carry more than a handful of armaments.

It is likely, however, that subsequent Chinese aircraft carriers will be larger and will incorporate catapults, or perhaps even an electromagnetic launch system, such as the newest US carrier, the USS *Gerald R. Ford*, uses. In any event, most analysts believe that China ultimately wants a fleet of at least three, and perhaps up to six carriers, depending on whether it wishes to engage in sustained or surge operations.

If China acquires not just one but a fleet of aircraft carriers, it would greatly alter the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific. It would mean the reorientation of the PLAN around carrier battle groups (CVBGs), with the carrier at the heart of a constellation of supporting submarines, destroyers, and frigates – an amalgamation of power projection at its foremost. Such CVBGs are among the most impressive instruments of military power, in terms of sustained, far-reaching, and expeditionary offensive force. In addition, it is likely that at least some of these new Chinese carriers will be based in Hainan Island, adjacent to the South China Sea.

Amalgamation of Military Force

This amalgamation of force, combined with the rise of the “little blue men” and the growing militarisation of the SCS gives a new strategic dimension to this body of water. In particular, researchers at the US Naval War College see the South China Sea as being increasingly dominated by China not just according to seapower, but to land power as well.

As they put it, *the more or less permanent deployment of land-based Chinese military power at both extreme ends of the SCS – Hainan and Woody Island in the west, and the new artificial islands in the east – means that China is basically trying to turn the South China Sea into a strait.* In other words, Beijing seeks to transform the South China Sea from an international sea-lane into a Chinese-controlled waterway and a strategic chokepoint for other countries.

This “continental militarisation” of the SCS not only diminishes the “open order” of the Southeast Asian maritime sphere. It also greatly raises the likelihood that the SCS will become a flashpoint for conflict. China is not only militarising the SCS, it is making it too important for Beijing to lose.

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