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## *China's Bluewater Navy Series*

# **China's Growing Maritime Role in the South and East China Seas**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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The views expressed in this paper are the author's alone and may not necessarily reflect the stance of any organization including the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force. They are solely responsible for any errors in fact, analysis, or omission.

## ABOUT THE SERIES

As part of our study, "Beyond the San Hai: The Challenge of China's Bluewater Navy," CNAS commissioned a series of essays from Japanese experts exploring the implications of China's bluewater navy capabilities. These papers were crucial to our analysis and have done much to shape the study's findings.

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The Asia-Pacific Security program seeks to inform the exercise of U.S. leadership in Asia by analyzing how the United States can rebalance its priorities; shape a rules-based regional order; modernize traditional alliances; build the capacity of new partners; and strengthen multilateral institutions. From exploring rising maritime tensions in the region to crafting ways to renew key alliances and partnerships to articulating strategies to extend and enhance America's influence, the program leverages the diverse experience and background of its team, deep relationships in the region and in Washington, and CNAS' convening power to shape and elevate the conversation on U.S. policy across a changing Asia.

## INTRODUCTION

In the South and East China Seas, an abnormal state of affairs persists that cannot be defined as either peace or war. In the South China Sea, incidents such as island disputes, land reclamation, confrontations, clashes between maritime law enforcement vessels, freedom of navigation operations by US Navy (USN) and threats from the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) against them are heightening tensions in the region. In particular, China's aggressive actions to expand its maritime control have attracted widespread attention. In the Paracel Islands, China has extended its runway on Woody Island and deployed surface-to-air missile systems. In the Spratlys, it has pressed ahead with rapid and large-scale land reclamation works on seven of the Spratly Islands and has built infrastructure including runways and ports that can be used for military purposes.<sup>1</sup>

In the East China Sea, numerous close encounters have occurred. This includes helicopters and other aircraft flying close to destroyers belonging to Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF), PLAN destroyers illuminating fire-control system radars on a JMSDF warship<sup>2</sup>, and Chinese fighter jets approaching Japanese and U.S. aircraft at unsafe distances.<sup>3</sup> In 2016, the 121 Chinese government vessels crossed into the territorial waters of the Senkaku Islands – the second highest number in history.<sup>4</sup>

Despite this worrisome maritime situation, U.S. President Donald Trump's policy in the Asia-Pacific region is still unclear. For example, neither China nor the Asia-Pacific region are mentioned in the priority list in the new administration's policy memo, obtained and released by *Foreign Policy*.<sup>5</sup> Countries in this region are concerned that the Trump Administration might pursue some sort of a deal with China that may ignore regional countries, lack a long-term strategy, and focus on short-term economic interests. Admiral Blair, the former Director of National Intelligence and Commander of U.S. Pacific Command, expressed his concern about the new administration's policy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) on November 29, 2016: "Overlaps in economy and security may result in deal-making in maritime security in the Asia-Pacific Region and will put some reality into this idea that the Pacific is big enough for both the United States and China."<sup>6</sup> Although it is not easy to predict the situation in the South and East China Seas in circa

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<sup>1</sup> Japan Ministry of Defense, *China's Activities in the South China Sea* (December 2016).

<sup>2</sup> According to U.S. Navy rules and procedure, a warship can exercise the right of self-defense to a vehicle showing hostile intents. According to the Rules of Engagement Handbook, radar illumination is an indicator of hostile intent. Thus, we can conclude that this situation was extremely dangerous and the right of self-defense was applicable. (See Department of the Navy, *The Commander's Handbook on The Law of Naval Operations*, NWP 1-14M (July 2007), and International Institute of Humanitarian Law, *Rule of Engagement Hand Book* (September 9, 2007), 22.

<sup>3</sup> Japan Ministry of Defense, *Defense of Japan 2016* (2016), p. 55.

<sup>4</sup> Mainichi Shinbun, "121 Government ships invade Japanese territorial water, last year was the second highest," [mainichi.jp](http://mainichi.jp/articles/20170105/k00/00m/010/121000c), January 5, 2017, <http://mainichi.jp/articles/20170105/k00/00m/010/121000c>.

<sup>5</sup> John Hudson, Paul McLeary, Dan de Luce, "Exclusive: Russia Missing from Trump's Top Defense Priorities, According to DoD Memo," [foreignpolicy.com](http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/12/20/russia-missing-from-trumps-top-defense-priorities-according-to-dod-memo/), December 20, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/12/20/russia-missing-from-trumps-top-defense-priorities-according-to-dod-memo/>.

<sup>6</sup> Admiral Blair suggested the examples of possible "good deal" in Trump's eyes may include:

- a. Security of commercial shipping;
- b. As peace time activities, the US should reduce reconnaissance activities near the Chinese Coast and notify China of any activities;
- c. China should stop all militarization in the South China Sea and in the vicinity of the Senkaku Islands.

2030, projection plays an important role in crafting a long-term perspective and preventing actors from simply reacting to events as they occur. This paper analyzes China's maritime role in approximately 2030 on the basis of its maritime views and strategy.

## CHINA'S MARITIME VIEWS

Since Hugo Grotius wrote *Mare Liberum* in 1609, scholars and societies alike have considered oceans to be communication channels as well as public goods. To utilize oceans peacefully and equally, the international community has maintained international norms and rules, including international customary law and written law. After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, China became a state and exercised its international role by participating in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). China has, however, taken a unique maritime perspective on UNCLOS, which has become a double standard as it has risen.<sup>7</sup> For example, PLAN fleets passed U.S.'s territorial water near Aleutian Islands while exercising innocent passage in September 2014. China requests prior notification before other countries' warships pass its territorial waters, but China did not inform the United States. Dr. James Kraska of the Naval War College argues, "The United States should withdraw recognition of China's rights under UNCLOS to navigate freely throughout the South China Sea to the extent that Beijing does not respect reciprocal rights in international law. China has been afforded full rights to operate freely on the oceans, including in their territorial seas in innocent passage and EEZs without restriction, while it dangerously impedes and hampers foreign warships and military aircraft operating in areas under its claimed sovereignty or jurisdiction."<sup>8</sup> In addition, China treats the seas near its shores as oceans that should be dominated by China, which elevates sovereign claims over international rules, while treating distant seas as communication channels free for all to use.

In the neighboring seas, China holds a unique concept of maritime jurisdiction known as "national maritime land."<sup>9</sup> Under this concept, China takes territorial water, contiguous water, and EEZs as national maritime zones in which China can exercise strong rights, such as banning military exercises (see Figure 1). In addition, in the South China Sea, China seems to claim sovereignty based on the "Nine-Dash Line" and historical title, which have been delegitimized by the recent Permanent Court of Arbitration decision.<sup>10</sup>

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Admiral Dennis Blair, "China's Power: Up for Debate," (Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C., November 29, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> For instance, Xinhua News posted an article criticizing the U.S. Navy's military exercise in China's EEZ without China's permission. See Dong Wenxian, "Exclusive Economic Zone is not International Waters: the U.S. Invade International Law," news.xinhuanet.com, December 7, 2010, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/mil/2010-12/07/c\\_12854815\\_2.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/mil/2010-12/07/c_12854815_2.htm).

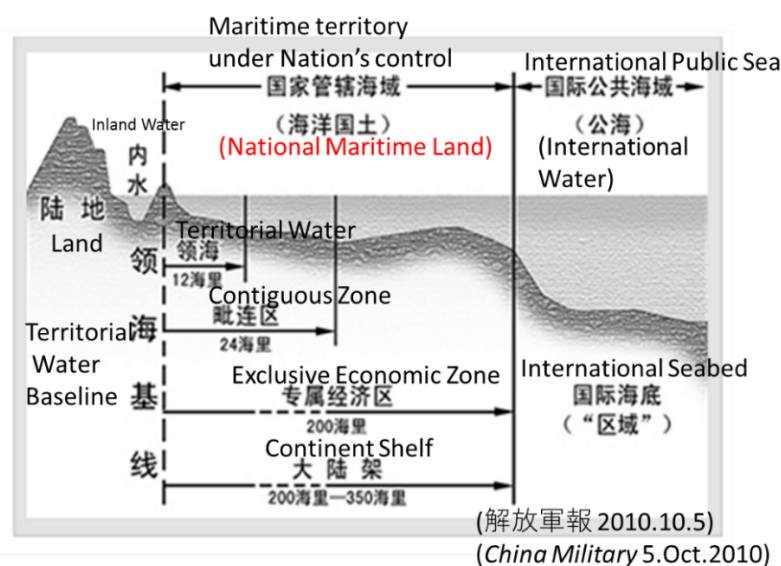
<sup>8</sup> James Kraska, "Tillerson Channels Reagan on South China Sea," lawfareblog.com, January 12, 2017, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/tillerson-channels-reagan-south-china-sea>.

<sup>9</sup> According to JMSDF Captain Katsuya Yamamoto, who was Japan's defense attaché to China, many PLA officers believe China's concept of "maritime land" imparts its maritime claims with many of the same rights as territorial land. Japan Ministry of Defense, *China from Defense Attache's Viewpoint*, No.10, (January 12, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> China claims its historical title in the area. However, Bill Hayton concludes his speech by saying, "(China's) claim is not ancient but modern. The claim was developed in response to domestic political crises. Elite knowledge about the sea was minimal and expanded southwards. The claim is not natural but the result of 20<sup>th</sup> century circumstances."



Figure 1



### CHINA'S MARITIME STRATEGY

For many years, China had no clear maritime strategy. China began to build up maritime capability as required by the security environment. However, after Liu Huaqing, who was deeply trusted by Deng Xiaoping, became Commander of the PLAN, he promulgated mid- and long-term maritime strategies. Liu was known as China's Mahanist for his emphasis on sea control rather than undifferentiated freedom of the seas.<sup>11</sup> His strategy of "offshore defense"<sup>12</sup> aims at control of China's "near sea," which applies to the First Island Chain and includes the South and East China Seas.<sup>13</sup> With this strategy, the PLAN changed from reactive naval build-up to proactive capacity building, aimed at mid- and long-term strategies.<sup>14</sup> (see Figure 2)

Bill Hayton, "The Modern Origin of China's South China Sea Claim" (Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C., September 22, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> As Mahan's concept of sea control includes the meaning of protection of commerce, I do not discuss SLOC protection separately. However, I would like to emphasize that Mahan's concept of "sea power" includes peaceful commerce and shipping. (see Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783* (Dover Publications, Inc., 1987).

<sup>12</sup> Although 近海防御 is normally translated as "offshore defense," Toshi Yoshihara says this is vague and a more literal and accurate rendering of the term is "near sea." Toshi Yoshihara and James R. Holmes, *Red Star Over the Pacific: China's Rise and the Challenge to US Maritime Strategy* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2010) p. 24.

<sup>13</sup> Shi Changxue, *Naval Commander Liu Huaqing* (Chosei Press, February 2013), 126.

<sup>14</sup> Barnard D. Cole, *The Great Wall at Sea: China's Navy in the Twenty-First Century* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2010), 16.

Figure 2

Period	Strategy	Area of operations	Objectives	Events
1950s – 1970s	Coastal defense and Inshore defense	Coastal and inshore areas not far from the mainland	-Supporting land engagements -Preventing enemy infiltration from sea	-Recover the offshore islands occupied by Taiwan including Hainan island(1949-1951). -Relations with the Soviet Union deteriorated(1959-1985). -Conflict with Vietnam(1979).
1980s to beginning of 2000s	Offshore defense	Yellow Sea, East China sea, South China sea, Spratly archipelago and the waters within and beyond the Taiwan-Okinawa island chain as well as the northern sea area of the Pacific	-Prevention of enemy invention -National unification -Safeguarding of territory -Protection of SLOCs - Protection of maritime rights and interests	-General Liu Huaqing's First and Second Island Chain thought. -Third Taiwan Strait Crisis(1995-1996)
Beginning of 2000s - Current	Offshore defense and Open seas defense	Open seas in addition to offshore waters'	-Maintaining and strengthening offshore defense strategies -Safeguarding China's interests overseas -Counterattack with nuclear weapons -International security cooperation	- Participation in international anti-piracy efforts in the Gulf of Aden(2008-current). -Rapid land reclamation in the SCS(2014-current). -Drastic increase in activities at the vicinity of Senkaku islands(2012-current)

Source:

Japan National Institute of Defense Studies, *China Security Report 2016*.

Toshi Yoshihara, *Red Star Over the Pacific* (Naval Institute Press, Annapolis Maryland, 2010).

Bernard D. Cole, *The Great Wall at Sea* second edition ((Naval Institute Press, Annapolis Maryland, 2010).

Since Liu's time, there has been relatively little change in China's maritime strategy in the South and East China Seas. China's 2015 defense white paper added "open-seas protection" to its naval missions, which emphasizes safeguarding China's maritime interests overseas.<sup>15</sup> The strategy, however, notes that it will prioritize both "offshore defense" and "open-seas protection." Therefore, the importance of "offshore defense" has not changed and the PLAN will continue to pursue sea control in the South and East China Seas.

## TIME AND SPACE IN CHINA'S MARITIME STRATEGY

How will China's implementation of its mid- and long-term strategies in the South and East China Seas impact the region? The United States, Japan, and ASEAN countries must consider "time" and "space" dimensions of this challenge. Time gives advantages to status quo challengers who are highly resolved. In the classical Japanese international relations text *Politics and Time*, Yunosuke Nagai studies the reason why the United States lost the Vietnam war, and concludes that "the Vietnam war changed the essence of war from competing military capability to strength of 'will.'"<sup>16</sup> According to Nagai, over time, North Vietnam eroded the United States' will to continue to fight, leading to its eventual withdrawal. North Vietnam adopted a "ripening-time strategy" of waiting for

<sup>15</sup> The National Institute for Defense Studies, *NIDS China Security Report 2016: The Expanding Scope of PLA Activities and the PLA Strategy* (2016), 6.

<sup>16</sup> Nagai Yunosuke, *Politics and Time*, (Chuokougyousho, 1979), 60.

ripened fruits to fall from trees. Nagai noted that differences in resolve may come from differences in political systems. In democracies, the people's will is easy to reflect and changes quickly, as compared to communism or other autocratic systems, and this may have implications in the present age, when democracy seems increasingly vulnerable.<sup>17</sup> Tomohisa Takei, former JMSDF Chief of Staff, argues that we can observe the “ripening-time strategy”<sup>18</sup> in China's activities in the South China Sea.<sup>19</sup>

China's activities in the East and South China Seas may be efforts to utilize time to slowly change the status quo as it rises, and to eventually make political and territorial changes that cannot be reversed. This is occurring over quite a short period, relying on material superiority, and eroding regional state's will to resist. Overall, in taking action in the South China Sea, China is utilizing time to its advantage.<sup>20</sup>

China has a strong will to dominate the area with greater maritime capability than ASEAN countries, so the passage of time may work in its favor.<sup>21</sup> The role of time can also be observed in the East China Sea. Since 2012, China has revitalized coast guard activities around the Senkaku islands and has made the activities routine as it waits for its opportunities to ripen.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, Takei argues that in addition to the fact that status quo challengers enjoy time advantages, space provides its own opportunities. In a given space, a status quo challenger can take the initiative to suppress a status quo protector's efforts to maintain it during the process of “time ripening.” The status quo challenger can raise the threshold level of change gradually and slowly enough so as not to overstep a red line for the status quo protector. The “salami-slicing strategy” in the South China Sea is a good example. In the East China Sea, China deliberately and slowly increases (or sometimes decreases) the number of government ships around the Senkaku islands so as not to step over Japan's red line, but steadily increases the space for warships and military aircraft and the frequency of operations.<sup>23</sup> Thus, by taking consideration of time and space concepts, the status-quo challenger, China, has huge advantages in the South and East China Seas.

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<sup>17</sup> Nagai's premise can be said to be true to some extent for China, North Korea and Al-Qaeda in their willingness to continue conflicts at high costs, as well as for the United States in some campaigns, in which it has proven to be cost sensitive, such as Somalia in 1993. This analyses supposes that Nagai's position is true least for China, which is believed adopting so-called “the hundred-year marathon” strategy, seeking world hegemony by 2049. See Michael Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Griffin, 2016).

<sup>18</sup> Younosuke, *Politics and Time*, 60.

<sup>19</sup> Tomohisa Takei, *New Time and Space for Maritime Defense Strategy*, JMSDF Command and Staff College Strategic Study Review (JMSDF Command and Staff College, Nov, 2016) pp. 2–15.

<sup>20</sup> Tomohisa Takei, JMSDF Command and Staff College, *New Time and Space for Maritime Defense Strategy* (November 2016) 2–15.

<sup>21</sup> In particular, regional maritime law enforcement capabilities have stark advantages. See Office of Naval Intelligence, *The PLA Navy: New Capabilities and Missions for the 21st Century*, (September, 2015), 45.

<sup>22</sup> With some exceptions, two or three Chinese government vessels intrude into Japan's territorial waters two to three times a month for approximately two hours. See Japan Ministry of Defense, *Defense of Japan 2016* (2016), 53.

<sup>23</sup> For example, a *China Military Online* article (October 21, 2015) reported that in recent years, all major combatants in the East China Sea area deployed assets for an average of more than 150 days. See Japan Ministry of Defense, *Defense of Japan 2016*, 53.

Concept	Character	Goal and Purpose
Time	With consistent and strong will, change timeline flexibly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wait until the target state exhausted</li> <li>• If necessary rush and establish the “Status quo” in favor of challenger.</li> </ul>
Space	Change extent of challenge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Paralyze the status quo protector's sensitivity.</li> <li>• Raise the threshold level of change gradually.</li> </ul>

## THE FUTURE MARITIME ROLE OF CHINA IN THE SOUTH AND EAST CHINA SEAS

In the forgoing paragraphs, I have made three arguments about China's maritime role in the East and South China Seas. First, China claims sovereignty over these seas and applies international law only selectively in these areas. Second, its mid and long-term strategies for the South and East China Seas require sea control. Third, from the time and space perspectives, China holds advantages in both the South and East China Seas.

For the foreseeable future, China will pursue sea control in its near seas and will maintain the initiative in its quest. With this premise, and assuming that the strategies of the United States, Japan, and ASEAN states will not change China's trajectory, it may achieve some of its strategic goals, at least partially, by 2030. To evaluate PLAN's possible influence in the South and East China Seas, it is useful to examine the naval capabilities at its disposal. Estimated naval capabilities in this area are shown in Figure 3.

**Figure 3**

Year 2016										
	PLAN	USN in Asia-Pacific	JM SDF	Brunei	Indonesia	Malaysia	Philippines	Thailand	Vietnam	Taiwan
CV	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
SSBN	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
SSN/SSK/SSA	59	8	18	0	2	2	0	0	6	4
Destroyers	21	22	39	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
Frigates	51	2	6	0	9	2	3	9	4	22
Corvetts	18	0	0	4	22	12	12	10	9	0
Year 2030										
CV	4	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
SSBN	5	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
SSN/SSK/SSA	87	15	22	0	15	5	0	5	6	10
Destroyers	34	55	48	0	0	0	0	0	5	10
Frigates	68	15	6	0	0	6	3	13	15	35
Corvetts	26	0	0	4	30	20	12	13	20	0

Source:

IHS Jane's Fighting Ships 2015–2016

Andrew S. Erickson, *Chinese Naval Shipbuilding* (Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, Maryland, 2016)

2014 Quadrennial Defense Review ([http://archive.defense.gov/pubs/2014\\_Quadrennial\\_Defense\\_Review.pdf](http://archive.defense.gov/pubs/2014_Quadrennial_Defense_Review.pdf) accessed on Jan 17, 2017).

Japan National Defense Guidelines for FY 2014 and beyond ([http://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/2014/pdf/20131217\\_e2.pdf](http://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/agenda/guideline/2014/pdf/20131217_e2.pdf) accessed on Jan 17, 2017).

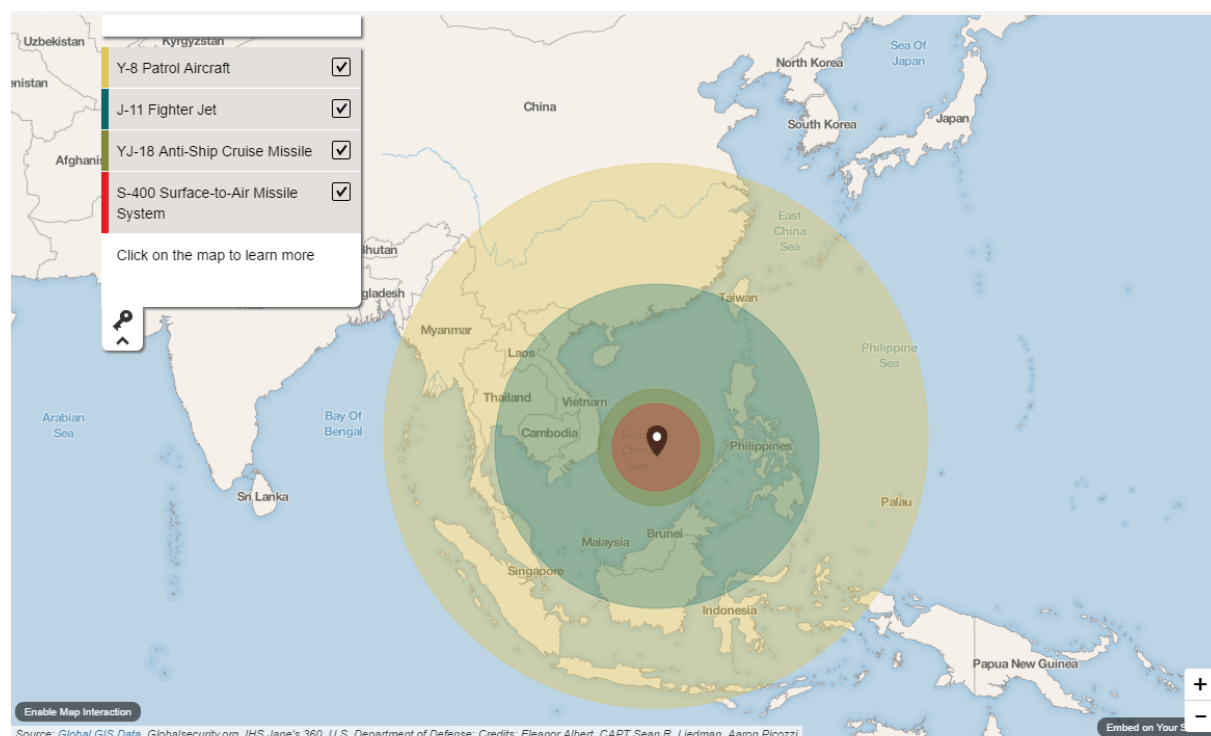
The United States Seventh Fleet (factsheet) (<http://www.c7f.navy.mil/Portals/8/documents/7thFleetWebPagerFactsheet.pdf?ver=2016-01-27-061248-087>)

Eguchi Yasuhiro, Yoshida Akiji, Asano Ry, *Expanding PLA* (Kouyushobou, 10 June, 2012).



On the basis of this data, we can make two clear analytic assertions. First, in the South China Sea, there will be huge capability gaps between the PLAN and the other claimants, and even if they are combined, and there is no chance that disputing countries will be able to counteract the PLAN unilaterally. In addition, if China continues its militarization on the seven Spratly islands at its current pace, it will enhance its power projection capability in the South China Sea and the straits of Southeast Asia. (see Figure 4) Second, in the East China Sea, the PLAN will achieve parity with the combined U.S. and Japan naval capabilities, even if the United States implements the planned rebalance and deploys 60% of its surface ships).

**Figure 4: China's Power Projection Coverage with Militarized Spratly Islands**



Source: *Global GIS Data*, *Globalsecurity.org*, *IHS Jane's 360*, *U.S. Department of Defense*; Credits: Eleanor Albert, CAPT Sean R. Liedman, Aaron Picozzi  
 Source: *Global GIS Data*, *Globalsecurity.org*, *IHS Jane's 360*, *U.S. Department of Defense*; Credits: Eleanor Albert, CAPT Sean R. Liedman, Aaron Picozzi and Council on Foreign Relations, *China's Maritime Disputes*, <https://www.cfr.org/asia-and-pacific/chinas-maritime-disputes/p31345#/>, accessed on February 11, 2017.

This permits several inferences about China's role. In the South China Sea, The PLAN will overwhelm the naval capabilities of each country in the area and will maintain power projection capability in the region. It will aim to establish sea control in the South China Sea and to establish a posture to cover and project air power on Malacca Strait, Sunda Strait, and Lombok Strait. It will wait for its "ripening time" by using space to its advantages via the Coast Guard and maritime militia of dual-use fishing vessels.<sup>24</sup> In the East China Sea, the PLAN will reach parity with combined USN

<sup>24</sup> U.S. Pacific Fleet Commander Admiral Scott Swift is seriously concerned that this fishing boat militia is a highly organized fleet with sophisticated command and control. See Christopher P. Cavas, "China's Maritime Militia a Growing Concern" *defensenews.com*, November 21, 2016, <http://www.defensenews.com/articles/chinas-maritime-militia-a-growing-concern>. The US-China Commission recommends that the Pentagon's annual China report include a dedicated

and JMSDF naval capability, and the PLAN will hold an advantage in the total number of small warships.

Overall, China will wait for its “ripening time” as the PLAN will become superior in naval capability. China will gain sea control to the greatest extent possible within the First Island Chain. China will take advantage of space by utilizing small warships, the coast guard, and maritime militia, and will exhaust Japan with its significant advantage in numbers.

## CONCLUSIONS

It is clear that China's maritime role in the South and East China Seas will grow from China's continental maritime perspective and strategy. In both seas, time and space will play vital roles. In the South China Sea, where the world will not be able to resist the “ripening time and space,” the situation will become serious for the international community. China will seek to make the South China Sea its inland sea, and the international community may not be able to use it as a free communication channel. In the East China Sea, the key will be how Japan can show its own strong and consistent will with proper actions.

What should we do to urge China to give up its challenge? The United States and Japan should consider drastic approaches in their mid- and long-term visions. For example, allied countries such as Japan and Australia should think about how they can reform their maritime capability while the U.S. Navy should return to a strategy based on sea control.<sup>25</sup> We should reconsider the relationship with Taiwan as an element of a broader alliance against China; this has been downplayed by the United States and Japan because of their desire for good relations with China. Our alliance should also urge India and South Korea to play a proactive role in the South China Sea as these states heavily depend on the sea lanes for resources and security.

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section on the maritime militia. See U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2016 Annual Report to Congress*, (November 16, 2016), 29–30.

<sup>25</sup> The U.S. Navy takes sea control seriously and has adopted the new surface warfare concept “distributed lethality” which emphasizes return to sea control from power projection. See, e.g., Commander Naval Surface Forces, U.S. Pacific Fleet, *Surface Force Strategy: Return to Sea Control*, (January, 2017).