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ANALYSIS

The South China Sea Long Game

March 30, 2016 | *RealClearDefense*

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The great Chinese strategist Sun Tzu, counseled, "Supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting." At its core, this means placing your enemy in such a disadvantageous position that he comes to believe it is useless to resist. In modern military parlance this is known as achieving decisive "positional advantage."

In the spirit of Sun Tzu, China continues militarizing islands, some artificially created, in the disputed waters of the South China Sea, where the People's Liberation Army has deployed advanced fighter jets, radars and missiles. China's near-term goal is to establish positional advantage over Southeast Asian nations. This is an important step in its long-term objective of shifting the military balance so decisively against them that they lose faith in their American partner and accommodate themselves to a new regional order dictated from Beijing.

China is establishing its position astride a strategic trade route that serves as an economic lifeline to Japan, the Philippines, South Korea and Taiwan, countries with whom we have longstanding security commitments. Chinese forces are now also in close proximity to the Philippines and Vietnam, greatly reducing both countries' strategic depth and their ability to resist further acts of coercion by Beijing. To the south, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore now find PLA forces on their doorstep.

While Beijing continues pursuing its long game to establish itself as the Western Pacific's hegemon, nations in that region look to their American ally and partner for support. Until recently Washington has been found wanting.

Five years ago President Barack Obama announced his intent to "rebalance" U.S. military forces to the Asia-Pacific region, apparently to offset the growing regional instability triggered by Beijing's military buildup. Thus far the "rebalance" has proven to be more rhetoric than reality or, as they say in Texas, a policy of "big hat, no cattle." Not surprisingly, China has become more belligerent.

Entering 2016 Washington's response to this most recent and provocative move by Beijing had been limited to occasional and modest freedom of navigation operations through the South China Sea waters that Beijing now claims as its own, while Secretary of State John Kerry's promised that the U.S. would engage in "very serious conversations" with the Chinese. Clearly, however, more is needed to restore a stable military balance in the region and reestablish the confidence of our allies and partners. And there are signs that the administration may finally be stirring itself to action.

First, the United States should take the lead in insuring freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. President Obama would do well to follow the example set by his predecessors. When Stalin cut off the allies' land access to Berlin in 1948, President Truman organized the Berlin Airlift that affirmed U.S. access rights and served as an example to the free people of Europe that we would stand with them. When Khrushchev ordered the construction of a wall around West Berlin, President Kennedy served notice that the U.S. would brook no challenge to its access to that city, directing a convoy accompanied by an Army battle group be sent through East Germany to Berlin. In 1973, when Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi claimed the international waters of the Gulf of Sidra to be his own, U.S. presidents began freedom of navigation patrols, and Libyan forces suffered significant losses when they attacked U.S. naval forces in the gulf. In 1987, when Iran threatened to disrupt freedom of navigation in the Persian Gulf during its war with Iraq, President Reagan directed the Navy to escort Kuwaiti oil tankers in the largest naval convoy operation since World War II.

Last month our senior commander in the Pacific, Admiral Harry Harris, announced the U.S. military would increase its freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea. This is a useful first step. Western Pacific nations, especially our close allies, Australia and Japan, should be encouraged to participate in these patrols. Regular over flights of U.S. and partner aircraft, both manned and unmanned, should be initiated. If necessary, commercial air and maritime traffic should be escorted through the area.

These patrols need to begin soon. The longer we wait, the greater the opportunity for China to establish “new facts” in the South China Sea.

Second, we must recognize that we are in a long-term competition with China for positional advantage, and act accordingly. Fortunately China’s aggressive moves find several Southeast Asian countries opening their doors to increased cooperation with the United States. They include the Philippines and Vietnam, whose territory runs parallel to the South China Sea Islands to the east and west, respectively. The administration has wisely exploited the opportunity, accepting Manila’s offer to pen up four air bases and one army camp to American forces. The United States should continue working with its Filipino allies to forward deploy American ground forces on those Philippine Islands, most prominently Palawan, in closest proximity to the South China Sea Islands. These Army units should emphasize extended range air and missile defense, coastal defense using anti-ship cruise missiles, and long-range rocket artillery. Their ability, if necessary, to deny PLA forces in the South China Sea the free use of the air and seas around the islands will offset China’s efforts to achieve positional advantage. Simply put, it will transform China’s aggressive move into a vulnerability. Vietnam should be encouraged and supported to field similar capabilities along the South China Sea’s western flank.

But we must act now, before China establishes a “new normal” in the region and our allies and prospective partners lose all faith in the United States’ willingness to meet its commitments. The time for a policy of relying on Beijing’s professed peaceful intentions and good will has past. It is time for Washington to lead from the front.

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