

# THE | DIPLOMAT

## Further Militarizing the South China Sea May Undermine Freedom of Navigation

**U.S. plans to conduct freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea will further destabilize the region.**

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In the near future the U.S. Navy (USN) reportedly will sail within 12 nautical miles of islands claimed by China in the South China Sea (SCS). This is welcome news for those who believe that Washington's weakness in the face of China's "blatantly illegal" island reclamation campaign has encouraged Beijing's bad behavior. Now the question is: what comes next?

The idea that FONOPS will rein in Chinese actions in the SCS is appealing. Administration critics charge that China has been making all the right moves to bolster its territorial claims while the United States sits on its hands. However, FONOPS will not resolve SCS territorial disputes. In fact, this approach likely will complicate U.S.-Chinese relations and make a peaceful settlement of territorial disputes more difficult.

### **Past Performance Does Not Guarantee Future Results**

Those who believe a show of force by Washington will bring Beijing to heel point to the East China Sea. In November 2013 the Chinese government announced an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over most of the East China Sea, including the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Beijing demanded that aircraft flying through the ADIZ identify themselves and warned that China's armed forces would "adopt defensive emergency measures" against noncompliant aircraft. Three days later the U.S. Air Force sent two B-52 bomber aircraft through the ADIZ, resulting in little more than Chinese finger wagging.

Relative calm ensued in the skies above the East China Sea. Japan and South Korea flew military aircraft through the ADIZ without incident and the American military reported no changes in its interactions with the Chinese military. Tensions eventually rose when the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) began enforcing the ADIZ, but the East China Sea generally has been peaceful. At the start of 2015, for example, Chinese aviation authorities announced that they would not take "defensive emergency measures" against civilian aircraft that did not recognize the ADIZ.

Superficially, then, the initial B-52 flight appeared to force China to back down from its overzealous territorial claims. However, a host of other factors influenced China's decision not to aggressively defend the ADIZ.

First, the PLAAF lacked sufficient military capabilities to do so. Second, Beijing recognized that the ADIZ undermined the diplomatic goodwill that President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang were building in the region. Third, Japan mounted a firm response to the ADIZ, demonstrating its willingness to stand up for itself.

The planned FONOP in the SCS is unlikely to produce a similar result. China's South Sea Fleet is more capable of enforcing Chinese territorial claims than the PLAAF was at enforcing the East China Sea ADIZ. For example, the South Sea Fleet has two new Type-052D Luyang-III-class destroyers in its inventory, which pose a major threat to USN surface ships and aircraft.

Moreover, other SCS claimants have less capacity to promote freedom of navigation compared to the countries that opposed the ADIZ. The willingness of many neighboring countries to ignore the ADIZ was an important reason why it failed. In particular, Japan has a relatively strong and capable military. Southeast Asian nations plan to expand and improve their navies, but these forces still trail China's fleet by a significant margin.

### **Full of Sound and Fury, Signifying Nothing**

A FONOP also is likely to spark a Chinese backlash, hindering a peaceful resolution of SCS disputes. As MIT's Taylor Fravel observed, a FONOP "gives China an opportunity to assert that the United States is the country 'militarizing' the South China Sea," providing Beijing with an excuse to respond in kind. It would be better to instead test Chinese pledges of goodwill.

Xi Jinping's recent promise not to militarize the artificial islands may be insincere, but conducting a FONOP will create pressure for Xi to respond aggressively, even if his commitment to eschew militarization was genuine. Likewise, China would appear aggressive, dangerous, and duplicitous if it continued to take provocative actions after promising to not militarize, making an American response appear reasonable. Additionally, a FONOP plays into Chinese nationalist rhetoric that paints American actions as hypocritical and one-sided.

What about America's allies and friends? Reassuring Washington's partners appears to be the true objective of the upcoming FONOP. To make up for their limited military capabilities, other claimants such as Vietnam and the Philippines have turned to the United States. Secretary of Defense Ash Carter has repeatedly proclaimed that American participation in the SCS dispute is intended to reassure allies that Washington will not leave them flapping in the wind.

For instance, at the Shangri La Dialogue, Carter declared, "There should be no mistake: the United States will fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows." A FONOP in the SCS would back his rhetoric. However, if China uses the U.S. action as a rationale for maintaining or increasing the rate of island reclamation then friendly states likely would feel even more threatened. This would counteract the FONOP's original purpose and would likely push the United States and China into a dangerous spiral, requiring more shows of force to reassure allies against an assertive China acting aggressively in response to American shows of force.

Chinese behavior in the SCS is a legitimate concern for the United States, but Washington should realize that this dispute is unlikely to be resolved with military power. Indeed, problems will only grow if both Washington and Beijing keep poking each other in the eye. Maintaining peace in the SCS instead requires the United States and China to work together to resolve precisely these kinds of contentious issues.

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