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## How NATO Should Confront China's A2/AD in the South China Sea

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**Solo Flight**

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CANADIAN FORCES COLLEGE – COLLÈGE DES FORCES CANADIENNES

JCSP 46 DL – PCEMI 46 AD  
2019 – 2021

SOLO FLIGHT

**HOW NATO SHOULD CONFRONT CHINA'S A2/AD  
IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA**

By Major Charles Hein

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## **How NATO Should Confront China's A2/AD in the South China Sea**

Present day's People's Republic of China (PRC) is a great regional hegemony and an aspiring superpower. Consequently, PRC's international policies are highly instrumental in geopolitical relations. Moreover, China's actions in the South China Sea are just another step towards global superpower status. Therefore, what should NATO and our regional partners do about China's blatant actions in the South China Sea to gain more influence in the Pacific region and in turn, the world? This paper will explain how NATO needs to stymie China's ever-growing global influence by directly challenging China's A2/AD system in the South China Sea, and thereby, counteracting China's flippant disregard for other South China Sea nations' sovereignty. To accomplish this purpose, this essay will explain China's foreign and security goals as well as how its objectives lead it to become a global superpower. Second, this paper will show how these actions in the South China Sea help China become a superpower. Lastly, it will demonstrate how NATO and its regional partners can meet the challenges of China's regional homogeneity by reinforcing international law, by maintaining a steady maritime and airspace presence in the region, and by bolstering its partners within the region.

The stated objectives and goals of the PRC are to maintain independence, to uphold their sovereignty as well as their territory's borders, to generate an international environment that is conducive to their interest, and to preserve peace in addition to furthering their economic development.<sup>1</sup> China's Foreign Policy of Peace affirms that the PRC will support a tenet of independence.<sup>2</sup> They will not succumb to any external

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<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Independent Foreign Policy of Peace," last accessed 22 Jan 2021, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

pressure to change their internal policies.<sup>3</sup> They “...will not form any political or military alliance with any big power or group of big powers nor engage in arms race and military expansion.”<sup>4</sup>

The next objective is sovereignty and territorial integrity. China states it will create and foster peaceful relations with all the nations with mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity.<sup>5</sup> Dependent on a foundation of mutual non-interference in internal affairs, China emphasizes friendly contacts for mutually beneficial cooperation. All disputes will not result in violence but will be resolved through negotiations based on mutual respect and equality.<sup>6</sup>

After independence and sovereignty, the successive goal is to create an advantageous global environment. The PRC articulates its conviction to the creation of a new international political and economic order based on reasonable and balanced ideals.<sup>7</sup> This new order should give opportunities to widespread objectives and common interests of all the nations of the world. China affirms that commonly accepted international norms and peaceful relations should lay the groundwork of all international relations.<sup>8</sup>

Along with China’s objectives of independence, territorial integrity, and favorable international community, China espouses a want for peace. Opposing all forms of hegemonies, the PRC believe that all nations are equal members of the international

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva and Other International Organizations in Switzerland, “China’s Independent Foreign Policy of Peace,” last accessed 22 Jan 2021, <http://www.china-un.ch/eng/ljzg/zgwjzc/t85889.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

community.<sup>9</sup> Disagreements and quarrels should be accomplished peacefully through negotiations instead of the threat or application of force. No nation should meddle in the internal affairs of another country for any reason. China will never force its ideology or social system on any nation, nor allows others to impress it on them.<sup>10</sup>

The final foreign policy purpose of the PRC is economic development. China's ongoing policy of slow opening its markets will continue.<sup>11</sup> Searching for growth through far-reaching trade relations, collaboration, and discussions with all countries of the world to encourage mutual prosperity, the PRC continues to be prepared for a positive part in bettering global mutual trade agreements. Recognizing the world economy is interconnected and inter-dependent, China knows "...economic globalization will bring both opportunities and big risks."<sup>12</sup>

How do these goals and objective lead to China to become a superpower? The PRC views the preservation of its independence without question as its main priority. Its undeniable military strength, while not experienced in major engagements, has prevented any major conflict in the South China Sea. Thus, China's aim of protecting its independence is successfully being accomplished through its activities in the South China Sea. The PRC is definitely maintaining its territorial integrity and sovereignty. No territories have been surrendered and land has been occupied or created in the South China Sea. The PRC has only increased its authority and land claims. If its actions in the South China Sea keep China from its stated aim of producing a beneficial international

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

community is still to be seen. Nevertheless, China is an important member in international organizations and continues to be a major investor in other countries. Their political and economic influence continues to grow and the PRC definitely is welcomed in parts of Southeast Asia because of its generous investments. Its weakly opposed annexation and militarization of the South China Sea Islands only further show the power of investment and resources China has in the region.

Despite the veneer of peaceful means to achieve these objectives, the PRC goal of peace has not been met. As time goes on, the PRC rhetoric of peace seems less convincing as many disagreements are being confronted with military action. Peace is not China's main focus. The militarization of the South China Sea is a prime example. The PRC's push for increased economic development and security quickly outweighs any notion of peaceful co-existence with its neighbors. Its ever growing economic influence internationally currently allows China's transgressions to be overlooked. All this combined makes the PRC's one step closer to a superpower along with the United States.

The South China Sea consists of the body of water east of Vietnam, west of the Philippines, and west of the island of Borneo (figure 1, page 6). Its geopolitical significance is immeasurable due to its location as the throat of the Western Pacific and Indian Oceans. It is estimated in 2016 approximately \$3.37 trillion of trade passes through the South China Sea.<sup>13</sup> "More than half of the world's annual merchant fleet tonnage...and a third of all maritime traffic worldwide"<sup>14</sup> passes through the South China

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<sup>13</sup> China Power Team, "How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea?" China Power. 2 Aug 2017. Updated 25 Jan 2021. Accessed 29 May 2021. <https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/>.

<sup>14</sup> United States, Energy Information Administration, *South China Sea*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 7 Feb 2013), 8.

Sea. The region has a proven 11 billion barrels of oil reserves with an estimated 28 billion barrels.<sup>15</sup> Natural gas reserves are estimated 190 trillion cubic feet.<sup>16</sup> Along with the crude oil under the seabed, more than “...triple the amount that passes through the Suez Canal and fifteen times the amount that transits the Panama Canal”<sup>17</sup> is transported through the South China Sea.

Along with all these economic reasons and resources, the South China Sea’s importance globally is created by the numerous nations who lay claim to territories within the Sea. Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Taiwan, and China all make claims to islands, reefs, rocks, seabed, and subsoil resources. These continually competing claims lead to enviable territorial disputes as the countries compete for trade routes and energy deposits. Subsequently, the South China Sea is a region of great global importance with a high risk of conflict.

The economic and territorial importance of the South China Sea falls into China’s national security goals and objectives. To highlight this importance, China in 2010 declared the South China Sea a “core interest.”<sup>18</sup> China views a large portion of the South China Sea as their territory based on historical claims. The twentieth century Chinese claims are currently called the nine dash line.<sup>19</sup> The nine dash line was established after

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>17</sup> Anthony, Fensom. “\$5 Trillion Meltdown: What If China Shuts Down the South China Sea?” *The National Interest*, 16 July 2017, Last Accessed 29 May 2021, \$5 Trillion Meltdown: What If China Shuts Down the South China Sea? | The National Interest.

<sup>18</sup> Robert D. Kaplan, “The South China Sea Will Be the Battleground of the Future,” *Business Insider*, 6 Feb 2016. Last Accessed 29 May 2021. The South China Sea Crisis (businessinsider.com).

<sup>19</sup> Raul Pedrozo, *China versus Vietnam: An Analysis of the Competing Claims in the South China Sea*, (Arlington, VA: CAN Analysis & Solutions, Aug 2014), 17.

the end of World War Two and the surrender of Japan.<sup>20</sup> Upon Japanese surrender, the then Republic of China sent naval ships to lay claim to the area depicted in the figure 1

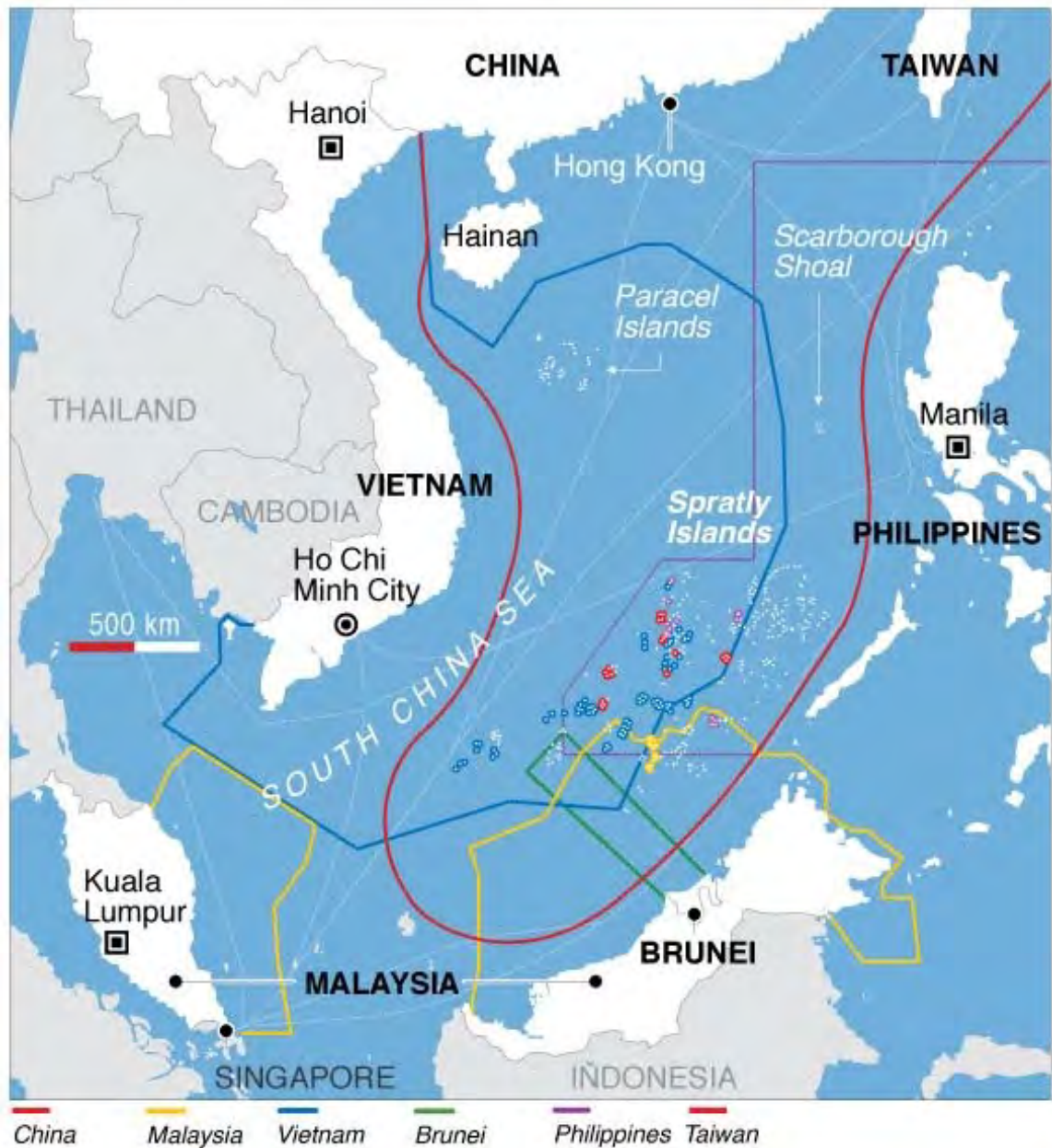


Figure 1. – Territorial Claims in the South China Sea

Source: Voice of America., Last Accessed 29 May 21, Challenging Beijing in the South China Sea  
 « State of Affairs (voanews.com).  
 below. After the Republic of China became the People's Republic of China, all Chinese

<sup>20</sup> Zhiguo Gao and Bing Bing Jia, "The nine-dash line in the South China Sea: history, status, and implications", *American Journal of International Law*, 107, January 2013, 98.



maps continued to depict this territorial claim.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, the South China Sea in China's view is their territory and fall within their security objective of sovereignty and territorial integrity.

In addition to sovereignty and territorial integrity objectives, the South China Sea occupation fulfills the objective of economic development. China is desperate to fill its energy needs. Currently, the PRC only produces 1.1 percent of the world's total oil reserves.<sup>22</sup> As of 2016, China consumes over 10 percent of the world's oil produced and "...over 20 percent of all the energy consumed on the planet."<sup>23</sup> The economic necessity of the potential oil production when combined with the South China Sea being one of the world's biggest fisheries makes the region a must for China.<sup>24</sup> The Sea employs more than 3.7 million people and generates billions of dollar a year.<sup>25</sup> It produces around 12 percent of the global fish catch while hosting more than half the world's fishing vessels.<sup>26</sup> As stated earlier, the proven and estimated energy reserves in the South China Sea are significant. Consequently, the energy reserves, the foody supply production, and geographical location make the South China Sea important to China.

How does China's actions in the South China Sea achieve their stated goals and objectives and lead them to become a global superpower? A superpower is "an extremely

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<sup>21</sup> Mohan Malik, "History the Weak Link in Beijing's Maritime Claims," *The Diplomat*, 30 Aug 2013, Last Accessed 29 May 2021. History the Weak Link in Beijing's Maritime Claims – The Diplomat.

<sup>22</sup> Kaplan, "The South China Sea .....",

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Rachael Bale, "The South China Sea Dispute Is Decimating Fish Stocks," *Natural Geographic*. 29 Aug 2016. Last Accessed 29 May 2021. The South China Sea Dispute Is Decimating Fish Stocks (nationalgeographic.com).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Asyura Salleh, "The South China Sea: Preventing the Tyranny of the Commons," *The Diplomat*. 4 Jan 2020. Last Accessed 29 May 2021. The South China Sea: Preventing the Tyranny of the Commons – The Diplomat.

powerful nation, especially one capable of influencing international events and the acts and policies of less powerful nations.”<sup>27</sup> Since fall of the Soviet Union, the United States of America is the world’s only superpower. In contrast, the PRC has been frequently called an emerging superpower. China is an Indo-Pacific power with ever increasing economic and military power. These national instruments power alone if they continue to grow will make China an international power. The economic influence combined with its military might places the PRC on a trajectory to becoming the next superpower.

The actions in South China Sea are a prime real world example of China’s goals and objectives in action. Under the guise of maintaining independence, territorial sovereignty, and territorial integrity as well as economic security, China has militarily occupied the South China Sea to further their historical assertions of ownership. The actions of the PRC in the South China Sea have made international headlines because of the economic and strategic value of the sea-lane of communication. The resources, proven and estimated, in the region make the sea an ever growing interest for growing nations looking to feed their insatiable, resource hungry economies. Add this to one of the world’s most productive fisheries and one of the world’s busiest commercial shipping lanes, the South China Sea islands are of immense strategic importance.

Currently, China has sought to strengthen its maritime claims through encroaching on other nations claims, increasing its maritime presence in the region, and attempting to exclude the other nation’s warships from the South China Sea. Between 2016 and 2018, Beijing has threatened military action against Vietnam for drilling within

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<sup>27</sup> Dictionary.com, “Superpower,” Last accessed 23 Jan 21, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/superpower>.

Vietnam's Economic Exclusion Zone (EEZ) multiple times.<sup>28</sup> They have went beyond rhetoric and went as far as sending survey vessels with military escorts in the Vietnamese EEZ surveying for oil and gas.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, China has continually interfered with the resupply of the BRP Sierra Madre, a Philippines naval vessel, and three Philippines civilian vessels near the Second Thomas Shoal, which under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is Philippines jurisdiction.<sup>30</sup>

Besides EEZ encroachments, China has increased its presence in the South China Sea. In 2019, the PRC swarmed the waters around the Philippines occupied Spratly Islands with hundreds of naval, coast guard, and state-sponsored fishing vessels.<sup>31</sup> China also has continuously maintained a coast guard presence around the Malaysian controlled Luconia Shoals.<sup>32</sup>

Along with violations of other Nation's maritime claims and increased nautical presence in the South China Sea, the PRC has become more aggressive in its actions to place claim on vast swathes of international waters. China has repeatedly declared infringement of sovereignty when warships have exercised navigation and other freedoms of the seas operations. In 2018, Beijing complained about a British ship and a French

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<sup>28</sup> Huong Le Thu, "China's Incursion into Vietnam's EEZ and Lessons from the Past", *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*. 8 Aug 2019, Last Accessed 29 May 2021. China's Incursion into Vietnam's EEZ and Lessons from the Past | Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (csis.org).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Chiarra Zambrano, "On Board the BRP Sierra Madre", *ABS-CBN News*, 30 Mar 2014, Last Accessed 29 May 2021, On Board the BRP Sierra Madre | ABS-CBN News | ABS-CBN News.

<sup>31</sup> Brad Lendon, "Philippines Protests Hundreds of Chinese Ships around Disputed Island", *CNN*, 2 April 2019, Last Accessed 29 May 2021, Philippines protests Chinese ships around disputed island | CNN.

<sup>32</sup> Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, "Update: China Risks Flare-up Over Malaysian, Vietnamese Gas Resources", 13 Dec 2019, Last Accessed 29 May 2021. UPDATE: China Risks Flare-Up Over Malaysian, Vietnamese Gas Resources | Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (csis.org).

vessel when they challenged China's assertions of territorial waters.<sup>33</sup> Beyond verbal warnings, a PRC warship caused the USS Decatur to maneuver to prevent a collision when the Chinese ship came within 45 yards of collision.<sup>34</sup>

Apart from strengthening its maritime claims, the PRC has made visible attempts to solidify its territorial rights. Beginning in 2013, China began converting small rocks, reefs, and shoals into island facilities. By 2018, they had created operational naval and air bases in the South China Sea.<sup>35</sup> China's militarization of the South China Sea has included anti-ship, anti-aircraft missiles, electronic jammers, bombers, radar, and communication interception capabilities within the Sea's many reefs and islands.<sup>36</sup> Many of these installations such as those in Mischief Reef and Second Thomas Shoal are part of the Philippines' EEZ violating their sovereign rights and jurisdiction.<sup>37</sup>

After describing the importance of the South China Sea, why China needs control of the area, and the actions that PRC is taking to control the Sea, what should NATO do about China's actions? NATO needs to reinforce international law, maintain a constant maritime and air presence, and bolster their regional partner's ability to counter Chinese actions in the South China Sea. To reinforce international law, the NATO nations and its regional partners need to ensure freedom of navigation and overflight within the

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<sup>33</sup> Liu Zhen, "France, Britain to Sail Warships in Contested South China Sea to Challenge Beijing", *South China Morning Post*, 4 Jun 2018. Last Accessed 29 May 2021, France, Britain to sail warships in contested South China Sea to challenge Beijing | South China Morning Post (scmp.com).

<sup>34</sup> Luis Martinez, "Chinese Warship Came Within 45 Yards of USS Decatur in South China Sea", *ABC News*. 1 Oct 2018, Last Accessed 29 May 2021, Chinese warship came within 45 yards of USS Decatur in South China Sea: US - ABC News (go.com).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Michael Peck, "This Map Explains How Chinese Bombers and Missiles Control the South China Sea", *Forbes*, 20 Aug 2020, Last Accessed 29 May 2021. This Map Explains How Chinese Bombers And Missiles Control The South China Sea (forbes.com).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

international waters and airspace. In all international forums, NATO should declare its disapproval of any land reclamation for military purposes, any use of threats in settling the territorial disputes in the South China Sea, and that it strongly supports freedom of navigation and overflight. Along with publicly decrying the actions of the PRC in the South China Sea, NATO should take China into account within its defense planning and doctrine. Historically, NATO was shaped to counter the Russian threat but the threat China can have to the economic safety of NATO nations as well as the PRC's ability to hobble NATO mobility and operations cannot be ignored.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, NATO needs to take into account the growing capabilities in cyber, cruise missiles, maritime, and nuclear forces within its preparing and planning for scenarios and contingencies.

Expanding NATO's maritime and airspace presence in the South China Sea will significantly lead to the reinforcement of international law. Therefore, along with the continued United States freedom of navigation operations with the U.S. Navy and Air Force within the region, NATO countries including France, Germany, and the United Kingdom who currently participate in the Rim of the Pacific exercises need to conduct their own exercise under the NATO flag.<sup>39</sup> A freedom of navigation exercise in the South China Sea would send a strong diplomatic message that NATO's partners in the region are not alone in disputing China's actions in the Sea.

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<sup>38</sup>Fabrice Pothier, "How Should NATO Respond to China's Growing Power?" The International Institute of Strategic Studies, 12 Sep 19, Last Accessed 29 May 2021, NATO China Review | China Growing Power | IISS free analysis.

<sup>39</sup> Carisa Nietzsche, Jim Townsend and Andrea Kendall-Taylor, "Enlisting NATO to Address the China Challenge", Center for a New American Security, 5 Oct 2020, Last Accessed 29 May 21, Enlisting NATO to Address the China Challenge | Center for a New American Security (en-US) (cnas.org).

In combination with reinforcing international law and increasing its presence in the South China Sea, NATO needs to considerably upgrade its Indo-Pacific relationships. The most influential members in the region (Korea, Japan, and Australia) need to enter the forefront of a tougher approach to China. NATO needs to enter into increased military cooperation and consultations on Indo-Pacific matters. Similar to the intense “...consultations on Baltic issues that place between NATO and Sweden and Finland...”<sup>40</sup> These meetings will lead to more intelligence sharing, joint planning, and exercises.

Besides bringing in Korea, Japan, and Australia into cooperation with NATO activities in the region, NATO must include the nations most exposed to China’s power: Taiwan, Vietnam, Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, and Brunei. NATO will need to develop non-military means to counter Chinese influence for these smaller countries who cannot militarily compete with the Chinese war machine. By improving the narrative of the economic benefits of NATO military and security cooperation to these regional countries, NATO can create a coalition to contain and influence the PRC’s ambitions to more peaceful outcomes.<sup>41</sup> Highlighting these allied and partner contributions can also help avoid creating a NATO versus China perception which could cause inherent conflict within nations who rely on China for trade and resources.<sup>42</sup> Overall, leveraging engagements with these regional partners to strengthen and reinforce the required cooperation of the regional countries to temper the Chinese rhetoric and actions will lead

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<sup>40</sup> Pothier, “How Should NATO Respond...”.

<sup>41</sup> Bonny Lin, et al., *Regional Responses to U.S.-China Competition in the Indo-Pacific: Study Overview and Conclusions*. (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2020).  
[https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR4412.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4412.html)

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

to additional international pressure against the PRC's disregard on international law and norms.

Present day's People's Republic of China (PRC) is a great regional hegemony and an aspiring superpower. Consequently, PRC's international policies are highly instrumental in geopolitical relations. Moreover, China's actions in the South China Sea are just another step towards global superpower status. Therefore, NATO and its regional partners should take actions against China's blatant activities in the South China Sea to gain more influence in the Pacific region and in turn, the world. This paper explained how NATO needs to stymie China's ever-growing global influence by directly challenging China's A2/AD system in South China Seas, thereby, counteracting China's flippant disregard for their sovereignty. It accomplished this purpose by explaining China's foreign and security goals as well as how its objectives lead it to become a global superpower. Second, this paper showed how these actions in the South China Sea help China become a superpower. Lastly, it demonstrated how NATO and its regional partners could meet the challenges of China's regional homogeneity by reinforcing international law, by maintaining a steady maritime and airspace presence in the region, and by bolstering its partners within the region.

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