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THE DEVIL DOGS AND THE DRAGON: THE USMC REFORMS TO OPPOSE CHINESE AGGRESSION IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

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Solo Flight

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Introduction

Preserving a free and open Indo-Pacific is a core interest of the United States.

- USINDOPACOM Commander Admiral Philip S. Davidson, U.S. Navy

The Pentagon has seen the emerging threat from China as their number one National security threat for many years and that claim has recently been reiterated by the Defense Secretary as he stated that the Defence Department's "highest priority remains China, as its government continues to use — and misuse — its diplomatic, economic and military strength to attempt to alter the landscape of power and reshape the world in its favour, often at the expense of others." There is arguably no other contested area as strategically important for both the United States of America (U.S.) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) than the South China Sea (SCS). Although the need for many reforms within the US military, have been identified or are in the process of being implemented, this paper will solely focus on the reforms that specifically apply to the United States Marine Corps (USMC).

This essay will attempt to assess 1) the threat that Chinese strategic goals in the SCS represents for the U.S., 2) the required military reforms that the USMC are required to undergo to be able to militarily respond to this threat. This essay is divided into two distinct but interconnected sections. First, the assessment of how China's actions in the SCS threaten the U.S. Second, an analysis of the required USMC force composition and capabilities required to enable naval operations to counter China's threat in the SCS.

The South China Sea

The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting.

- Sun Tzu, the Art of War

The SCS is a large body of water with a surface area of approximately 3.5 million km² making it the largest body of water after the five oceans.¹ It is geographically located in South East Asia and stretching from the Strait of Malacca in the south-west to the Taiwan Strait in the north-east, this semi-enclosed maritime space is of vital strategic importance². The SCS consists of a great number of contested archipelagos mainly divided into two separate regions: the Spratly Island, in the South, and the Paracel Islands further north. These islands and outcrops of protruding rocks are imperative to territorial claims made by littoral countries on the periphery of the SCS. More specifically, International Law, the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) states, in part, that any rocky outcrops visible above the water at high tide give the entitled Nation an expansion of 12 nautical miles of territorial waters around it, the area and its resources are therefore claimed as sovereign territory by the State.³

Further, the economic importance of the SCS cannot be understated, as the Global economy relies heavily on the approximately 5.3 Trillion USD in ship borne goods that traverse through the SCS annually.⁴ Additionally, regional fisheries statistics remain staggering with an estimated more than 50% of the world's fishing vessels operating in the SCS, which accounts for

¹ Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/South-China-Sea>

² Morton, Katherine. (2016). China's Ambition in the South China Sea: Is a Legitimate Maritime Order Possible?. *International Affairs*. 92. 909-940. 10.1111/1468-2346.12658.

³United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 10 December 1982. https://www.un.org/Depts/los/convention_agreements/convention_overview_convention.htm

⁴ China Power. <https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/>

approximately 12% of annual global fish catch.⁵ Lastly, the SCS is rich in natural resources. The U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) estimates that the SCS contains approximately 11 billion barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas in proved and probable reserves. Conventional hydrocarbons mostly reside in undisputed territory.⁶ It is easy to evaluate the geographic and economic importance of the SCS and how it can be extrapolated to a strategic importance for many of its users.

While the U.S. does not have any territorial claims to the SCS, as the world's hegemon, it uses its military powers to govern International Waters. In addition, the US remains committed to the concept of freedom of the seas and China's illegal actions in the SCS are continuously threatening this legal framework. Protecting Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs) for the US and its Allies (UK, EU, AUS, etc.) as the SCS constitutes trillions of dollars of inbound and outbound annual trade to these countries. Moreover, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the intergovernmental organization of ten Southeast Asian countries, that does not include China, are collectively striving for a passive resolution to conflict in the SCS to avoid armed conflict within the area.

⁵ <https://ocean.csis.org/spotlights/illuminating-the-south-china-seas-dark-fishing-fleets/#:~:text=The%20South%20China%20Sea%20accounted,Sea%20has%20been%20dangerously%20overfished>

⁶ https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/regions-of-interest/South_China_Sea (Report, pdf)



Figure 1 – The South China Sea’s disputed territory.

Source: Created by Scott L. Montgomery. From the Conversation.

<https://theconversation.com/whats-at-stake-in-chinas-claims-to-the-south-china-sea-62472>

China claims almost the entire SCS from its shoreline down to the 9 Dash line, a line that, since 1947, China has consistently used to make baseless historic territorial claims in the SCS. Furthermore, in 2016, The Hague’s permanent court of arbitration deemed the claim unfounded and argued that it had no legal basis, the final decision was to the dismay of the Chinese Republican Party.⁷ Many other littoral countries bordering the SCS, namely Malaysia, Brunei,

⁷ Beech, Hannah. ” Just Where Exactly Did China Get the South China Sea Nine-Dash Line From?” Time. 19 July 2016. <https://time.com/4412191/nine-dash-line-9-south-china-sea/>

The Philippines, Vietnam and even Taiwan, lay legal claims to their respective economic exclusion zone (EEZ) based on the UNCLOS, which grants them exclusive rights to all resources and trade within their EEZ, as their sovereign territory.⁸ All Waters outside of EEZs are International Waters and governed by the UN Maritime Law.⁹

The speed and scale at which China has illegally claimed the majority of the SCS which resulted in a colossal infrastructure project to expand islands, build military and civilian installations to forcefully occupy these territorial extensions. In addition to the overwhelming amount of resources that China has dedicated to acquiring territory in the SCS is the equally monumental efforts that they are committing to securing these areas from other willing users. The “Cabbage Strategy” has been used extensively by the People’s Liberation Navy (PLAN) to deter foreign vessels in the SCS. The strategy comprises of the use of vessels (Civilian and Military) in a swarm to physically prevent other Nations access to disputed islands or maritime areas.¹⁰ This particular techniques has worked brilliantly for seizing and controlling territory for China in the SCS.

⁸United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 10 December 1982.
https://www.un.org/Depts/los/convention_agreements/convention_overview_convention.htm

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Kazianis, Harry. “China’s Expanding Cabbage Strategy”. The Diplomat. 29 Oct 2013.
<https://thediplomat.com/2013/10/chinas-expanding-cabbage-strategy/>

Adapting the USMC

We must communicate with precision and consistency, based on a common focus and a unified message.

- General David H. Berger, 38th Commandant of the USMC

Following the Revolutionary War and the formal re-establishment of the Marine Corps on 11 July 1798, the USMC has maintained its role as the United States' military force trained to operate on littoral zones in support of Naval Operations.¹¹ However, since the beginning of the war on terror, the USMC was compelled to serve as the Nation's second land army in Iraq and Afghanistan, organized crisis response task forces, and forged a special operations component, while still clinging to their historic mission of large-scale amphibious landings.¹² Confronting the many years of the USMC's counterinsurgency policies, the USMC's new Commandant, General David H. Berger, has engendered guidance that will set the stage for his Marines to return to their roots and enact important changes in key identified domains to enable a force capable of fighting and winning wars against a peer adversary, if required to do so.

The return to great-power competition for the United States Government has necessitated some degree of reform in all of the U.S. Military services; however, this essay will solely focus on the scope of the key reforms required by the USMC to counter Chinese aggressions in the South Pacific and more importantly the SCS. Understanding the strategic role of a Nation's Maritime Force in achieving its diplomatic goals, The United States Military has begun to realign its three Maritime services (US Navy (USN), USMC and the US Coast Guard) directed towards a streamlined maritime strategy to counter the emerging threats from Russia and China.

¹¹ USMC University: <https://www.usmcu.edu/Research/Marine-Corps-History-Division/Brief-Histories/Brief-History-of-the-United-States-Marine-Corps/>

¹² <https://warontherocks.com/2019/10/a-striking-new-vision-for-the-marines-and-a-wakeup-call-for-the-other-services/>

The Tri-Service Maritime Strategy (TSMS) was created to align the services and their mandates in order to optimize their capabilities and resources towards one common goal of great-power competition.¹³ Significant USN/USMC reforms are required for naval operations in the SCS. Reforms required partly in response to the increased positioning of Chinese capabilities in creating a considerable Anti-access/area denial (A2AD) environment within the SCS. This increased A2AD threat is of considerable significance to USN Carrier groups operating in the region as the Chinese have developed the world's first anti-ship ballistic missile intended to target high value warships, particularly Aircraft carriers.¹⁴ In response the USMC will require a smaller, nimbler force that can operate independently within a contested area to counter the Chinese A2AD threat in the SCS.¹⁵

In 2019, The USMC Commander's Planning Guidance (CPG) was published and focused on the following five priority areas of reform: Force Design, Warfighting, Education and Training, Core Values, and Command and Leadership.

A Novel Force Design is well communicated as the Commandant's number one priority, it appears to necessitate the most profound and radical institutional changes to the USMC. As previously mentioned, the current USMC force structure is not organized, trained nor equipped to support naval operations. Thus, the Corps was tasked to divest efficient warfighting capabilities, like main battle tanks, towed cannon artillery and light attack air platforms, in addition to established organizational structures that do not pertain to their role of maintaining a

¹³ Advantage at Sea: Prevailing with Integrated All-Domain Naval Power. Dec 2020.

¹⁴ <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2020/11/chinas-new-aircraft-carrier-killer-is-worlds-largest-air-launched-missile/>

¹⁵ Advantage at Sea: Prevailing with Integrated All-Domain Naval Power. Dec 2020.

forward naval presence to enable sea control and denial operations. The decision to divest these capabilities remains necessary for the USMC to focus on acquiring identified critical capability shortfalls like expeditionary long range fires, air defense systems and high endurance, long-range unmanned systems with Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) /Electronic Warfare (EW), lethal and non-lethal capabilities appropriate for countering malign actors pursuing maritime “gray zone” activities.¹⁶

Warfighting will continue to be at the forefront of the USMC’s role as the Nation’s premier naval expeditionary force in readiness. Thus, to remain a relevant force in a changing operating environment, from asymmetrical warfare to a return of great power conflicts requiring a pivot to naval operations. The Marine Corps must be able to quickly and effectively integrate into the naval force during the execution of a naval campaign. Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO) is merely one of many concepts being adopted by the Marine Corps. For many, EABO is a controversial concept that has been implemented into the CPG. Critics point to the logistical challenges and the cost and size of current platforms used by the USMC as having detrimental effects on the potential success of EABO.¹⁷ However, regardless of the controversial nature of the proposed concept, EABO clearly seems to be the way the way forward in ensuring the relevancy of the Marine Corps in gaining and maintaining operational and strategic mobility for naval forces in the Indo-Pacific region.¹⁸

¹⁶ Commandant of the US Marine Corps. Force Design 2030. March 2020.

¹⁷ <https://thediplomat.com/2020/11/6-platforms-for-marine-expeditionary-advanced-base-operations-logistics/>

¹⁸ Commandant’s Planning Guidance: 38th Commandant of the Marine Corps. 2019.

The area of Education and Training focused on reiterating concepts like train as you expect and intend to fight as well as the need to have an educated professional force that is continuously pursuing the inextricably linked education and training programs for the complexities of the modern battlefield. However, the need to implement change in their formal schools program of instruction to reintroduce more naval operations highlighted the requirement of gaining a better understanding of their role in composite warfare. Additionally, reinforced the need to re-establish the lost art of professional wargaming at every level of the institution. The Marine Corps will build a modern facility at the Marine Corps University in Quantico, Va. This facility will enable the standardize use of wargaming for Professional Military Education (PME) within the Corps, and offer Marines a set of tools for structured thinking in the resolution of military problems within competitive circumstances.¹⁹

The Marine Corps' core values developed throughout its existence are as relevant today as they have always been. The warfighting ethos that propels Marines derived from the values of honour, courage and commitment are etched in their rich history and have led many generations of Marines to success both on and off the battlefield. However, as with many western militaries, the Marine Corps faces significant challenges attributable to the unintended consequences of naturally destructive human behaviours. This area of reform is summarized by the need to address the high rate of non-End of Active Service (non-EAS) attrition. This costly tendency, both financially and in personnel staffing, is responsible for 25,336 attritions of Marines that, between FY09-19, had been released for drug and alcohol offenses and misconduct.²⁰

¹⁹ Commandant's Planning Guidance: 38th Commandant of the Marine Corps. 2019.

²⁰ Ibid.

The last area focuses on the Marine Corps' Command and leadership, in the Commandant's clear direction to the leaders of the USMC on his expectations towards them. It concisely communicates the appropriate conduct demanded from every Marine, and at every level of leadership, the expectation is to enforce this standard and hold each other accountable for all actions. The notion of coaching, mentoring and teaching young leaders is mentioned as a critical part of the USMC achieving its desired effect of balancing the well-being of their Marines while adhering to upholding the institution's high standards.

While some of the reforms stated above are tied to extended timelines, for example the acquisition of equipment to generate new capabilities, there was an urgent need for the Marine Corps to acknowledge their shortfalls and begin the re-alignment of their forces.

Our wargames have shown that in any great power conflict, our alliances are an essential factor to achieving success.

- General David H. Berger, 38th Commandant of the USMC

As important as the USMC reforms are to the projection of U.S. Forces in the SCS, the U.S. continuously communicates the requirement for their military to work in a joint multi-national environment to achieve its strategic goals. A recent instance of the collaborative approach was in 2007, with the creation of the informal grouping known as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or simply "The Quad": US, India, Japan and Australia. The Asian version of NATO, a term used by China's top diplomat to describe the group.²¹ Earlier attempts of creating this grouping had failed due to the potentially abrasive nature of their mandate; however, with China's increased

²¹ Albert, Eleanor. Lindsay Maizland. "What is ASEAN?" Council on Foreign Relations. 24 Nov 2020. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-asean>

aggressions in the SCS, the countries felt it necessary to create a dialogue in hopes of a peaceful resolution of the hostilities.²²

Conclusion

Although regional disputes over the SCS are not novel²³, the shift in strategic focus for the US had been developing in recent years. As China continues to challenge, the World Order in many regards, it's increasingly aggressive actions within the SCS, in addition to their blatant disregard for the rule of international law, as observed in 2014 with the lost arbitration case against the Philippines, has garnered a lot of attention. Attention that is not limited to the world's hegemon superpower but also of its Allies, which are equally dedicated to the maintenance of an open and secure SCS. The current situation primarily focuses on the legal and diplomatic domain, the appropriate measures and policies must be undertaken to avoid an escalating situation in becoming a full-scale conflict between China and the United States. Stabilizing the South China Sea is an extraordinarily difficult strategic challenge, one that will require a coordinated and focused effort from an expansive range of regional and international partners.

The United States military must continue to align their multi-service approach to its operations within the SCS as a method of military deterrence against rising tensions and as a means to continue demonstrating the resolve of the United States and its Allies to adhering to a rules-based international order and demonstrating a firm commitment to peace and stability within the SCS. The continued engagement of international coalitions and multilateral agreements with all regional actors, should be at the forefront of the U.S. strategy to act as a

²² Rasheed, Zaheena. "What is the Quad and can it counter China's rise?" Al Jazeera. 25 November 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/25/what-is-the-quad-can-us-india-japan-and-australia-deter-china>

²³ <https://www.lawfareblog.com/south-china-sea-dispute-brief-history>

confidence-building measure. The diplomatic relationship with China must achieve long-term cooperation as to create an environment where the benefits of lawless actions and bully strategic engagements in the region no longer perceived to outweigh the political, diplomatic and economic costs to all countries involved. The appropriate use of the SCS, in accordance to international law, will continue to challenge the international community's efforts to regulate and stabilize the impartiality of operations within the region.

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