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Meeting the Challenge of Chinese Expansionism on the East Asian Littoral

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Over the past several months, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has exploited more and more tools to reinforce its claims over much of the East Asian littoral. The intended Chinese message seems clear: Administratively, militarily, diplomatically, and economically, the East Asian littoral is under Chinese dominance.

Ironically, even as the Chinese have been accelerating their efforts at dominating the East Asian littoral, the U.S. appears to be backing away. Despite the much-touted “pivot to Asia,” the Obama Administration has spent far more time on trying to broker Arab–Israeli peace than looking to stabilize East Asia. That Beijing's concept of security—and, as important, whom it is providing security *for*—may not align with American hopes and interests appears lost.

Increasing Chinese Assertiveness. The PRC's most recent move was the announcement by the Hainan government that it would enforce the requirement that foreign fishing boats obtain clearance from the central government to fish in Chinese-claimed waters of the South China Sea.¹ This announcement follows previous moves that place almost the entire South China Sea under Chinese administrative control, such as the elevation of Sansha city to prefecture

level—with the Spratlys, Paracels, and Macclesfield Bank all underneath it—and the incorporation of the South China Sea in passport maps of China.

Mediation efforts in this regard have been either rejected by Beijing or slow-rolled for many years. The Philippines, consistent with the United Nations Law of the Sea Treaty, which both Manila and Beijing have signed, has submitted the legality of China's claims for arbitration.² Not only has China refused to participate in the arbitration effort, but it has condemned the Philippine effort.³ Many interpret China's paltry aid and decision to delay dispatching a hospital ship in the wake of Typhoon Haiyan as further signaling Beijing's displeasure.⁴

China's declared air defense identification zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea neatly aligns with China's claims for its maritime exclusive economic zone. The ADIZ announcement came amid ongoing tensions between Beijing and Tokyo over the Senkakus, with Japanese and Chinese maritime law enforcement and coast guard vessels regularly operating in close proximity. Beijing appears to be ignoring the potential for miscalculation and inadvertent escalation in the air and waters around the islands. At the same time, by incorporating the disputed undersea mount of Ieyodo within the ADIZ, Beijing brought South Korea into the dispute over the zone.

The ADIZ decision may signal a greater willingness to employ military signaling to underscore Chinese claims. At the end of 2013, the Chinese dispatched their new aircraft carrier *Liaoning* to a new carrier facility at Sanya on Hainan island, marking its first operations away from the North Sea Fleet anchorages where it has tended to sail. During its transit, the Chinese also nearly collided with the

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USS *Cowpens* as they sought to herd the U.S. ship away from the Chinese carrier—accusing the U.S. ship of operating in too close proximity, 60 miles from the Chinese flattop.⁵

The Chinese aircraft carrier is smaller than any U.S. *Nimitz*-class super-carrier, but it is far larger than any combatant in any Southeast Asian navy. And the willingness to engage in dangerous ship maneuvers hearkens back to the 2009 incidents involving the USNS *Impeccable*, USNS *Victorious*, and USS *John S. McCain III*.

Beijing further reinforced its message, either deliberately or coincidentally, with the test of a hypersonic missile capable of evading American missile defenses.⁶ The system might constitute the warhead for the often-discussed anti-ship ballistic missile system aimed at U.S. aircraft carriers and is certainly part of the larger portfolio of Chinese “anti-access/area denial” capabilities.

American Policy Responses.

- **Increase the American diplomatic presence.** Secretary of State Hilary Clinton did not enunciate a “pivot to Asia” during her first years in office, but there was little doubt that she fulfilled such a policy, making a point of regularly visiting the region and interacting with the various leaders. Secretary of State John Kerry, by contrast, appears to be pursuing a policy of neglect. If the Asia pivot is to have any meaning, there needs to
- **Increase public diplomacy efforts.** While Confucius Institutes are established throughout the world, well-stocked with multimedia materials extolling the virtues of the PRC and well-funded with Chinese support, American efforts at public outreach, including strategic communications and information dissemination, are far less visible. Given regional suspicions of China, American public diplomacy would generate a positive return on investment. There needs to be more outreach to the broader Asian public to foster better understanding of the U.S. and show American interest in the region. One method would be the creation of more “American Centers” directly funded by the U.S. government, as well as “American Cultural Centers” established with American university partners at Asian colleges and universities.⁷
- **Advance free trade in Asia.** The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) would create an enormous free trade zone spanning both sides of the Pacific, including such major economies as South Korea and Japan as well as the U.S. Negotiations are proceeding, but slowly. Creating a truly liberalizing TPP should be made a priority for the Administration’s foreign and trade policy.

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2. Republic of the Philippines, “Statement by the Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs on the UNCLOS Arbitral Proceedings Against China,” January 22, 2013, <https://www.dfa.gov.ph/index.php/2013-06-27-21-50-36/unclos/216-sfa-statement-on-the-unclos-arbitral-proceedings-against-china> (accessed January 23, 2014).

3. Xinhua, “China Reiterates Opposition to Philippines Arbitration Bid,” February 20, 2013, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-02/20/c_132181037.htm (accessed January 23, 2014); and Xinhua, “China’s Refusal of Arbitration Request by Philippines Meets International Law,” August 30, 2013, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90883/8383304.html> (accessed January 23, 2014).

4. David Bosco, “Why Is China Giving the Philippines the Cold Shoulder?,” *Foreign Policy*, November 13, 2013, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/11/12/why_is_china_giving_the_philippines_the_cold_shoulder_typhoon_relief (accessed January 23, 2014).

5. James R. Holmes, “How the U.S. Lost the South China Sea Standoff,” *The Diplomat*, December 19, 2013, <http://thediplomat.com/2013/12/how-the-us-lost-the-south-china-sea-standoff/> (accessed January 23, 2014).

6. Agence France-Presse, “China Tested Hypersonic Missile Vehicle: U.S. Officials,” January 15, 2014, <http://news.yahoo.com/china-tested-hypersonic-missile-vehicle-us-officials-013222240.html> (accessed January 23, 2014).

7. Elizabeth Redden, “U.S. Answer to Confucius Institutes,” *Inside Higher Ed*, November 2, 2012, <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/11/02/colleges-open-state-department-funded-american-cultural-centers-china> (accessed January 23, 2014).

- **Maintain regional security.** The impact of sequestration, which has fallen disproportionately on defense spending, has already affected regional views of American credibility. American security requires the U.S. getting its economic house in order—but economic improvement cannot be obtained at the price of gutting American security.
- **Rethink inviting the PRC into RIMPAC.** The incorporation of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) into the RIMPAC multilateral military exercises, with no promise of reciprocal access for the U.S. military to Chinese exercises, makes the U.S. appear over-eager to engage Beijing. In this case, it also exposes the forces of friends and allies to massive Chinese intelligence penetration—as though the U.S. cares more about currying favor with Beijing than cooperating with Tokyo, Canberra, or Seoul. Continuing

to do so in the wake of the USS *Cowpens* incident potentially signals Beijing that even dangerous behavior on their part has no downside consequence. Given China's dangerous conduct, serious consideration should be given to suspending the invitation.

A Firm, Reliable Presence. In light of Beijing's growing assertiveness, the U.S. needs to make clear to both the PRC and its allies that it will maintain a firm, reliable presence in the region and that this extends beyond mere rhetoric. Moreover, given China's economic prowess, it is essential that any American response encompass not only military measures but the full array of diplomatic and positive economic levers as well.

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