CHINA’S STRATEGIC OPPORTUNISM:
SOUTH CHINA SEA DISPUTES IN THE TIME OF CORONA
The Wuhan-originated COVID-19 pandemic has not only exposed shared vulnerability in a highly globalized system, but also the enduring appeal of zero-sum geopolitics. Rather than ushering in an era of sincere cooperation and strategic benevolence, the world has instead witnessed China’s brazen remorselessness (for the rapid spread of the pandemic amid blatant lack of international travel restrictions in December and through January) and, even worse, unabashed opportunism in the adjacent waters. As soon as Beijing contained the crisis at home, it ruthlessly exploited distracted neighbors and rivals, who were now desperately scrambling for humanitarian assistance amid massive outbreaks at home. Beginning in March, China doubled down on its excessive and expansive claims in the South China Sea in violation of international law and regional principles: launching large-scale naval drills, deploying coast guard and para-military vessels to disputed areas, challenging US military assets, and harassing smaller claimant states, particularly Vietnam, Malaysia and the Philippines. With the pandemic hammering their economies, many regional governments will look to China for economic relief as the region slides into coronavirus-driven recession. China may soon move from Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects to all-out ‘bargain hunting’ among besieged neighbors, who are desperate to shore up their coffers and may, accordingly, consider opening up strategic state assets. While the recent geopolitical episode has punctured any illusion about China’s supposed ‘peaceful rise’, it has also underscored the need for greater cooperation among likeminded regional players to preserve and protect a rules-based international order. Individual nations should also ensure that their strategic sectors are protected from predatory purchases during the crisis. Otherwise, China will shape the emerging post-pandemic order to the exclusion of smaller nations as well as external powers.
The Offensive-Charming

With a vicious pandemic posing the gravest threat to humanity in recent memory, one would have imagined that zero-sum geopolitics will be pushed to the backburner. After all, the world is facing nothing short of what scientists call “existential risk”, a direct and planetary threat to the very viability of the human species. By April of this year, at least a third of the world’s population was placed under one kind of collective ‘lockdown’ or the other. No less than the United Nations’ Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, warned that the (COVID-19) plague is “threatening the whole of humanity - and the whole of humanity must fight back.” And with the shuttering of many sectors of the global economy, we are increasingly facing the prospect of a Global Depression, the worst economic contraction in more than century.

In fact, the prominent economist Nouriel Roubini has warned of a ‘Greater Depression,’ with “every component of aggregate demand... in unprecedented free fall.” Worst of it all is the human tragedy unfolding across continents. As the pandemic tightens its grip on the world, legitimate calls for accountability and inquiry into alleged cover up in the initial stages of the crisis have gone hand-in-hand with incendiary rhetoric against the disturbing backdrop of rising xenophobia in the West. The upshot is a suboptimal tit-for-tat exchange of blame and threats among major powers, which is depriving the world of much-needed time and coordination against a common enemy.

Eager to seize the strategic initiative and keep scrutiny of its massive mishandling of the pandemic’s global spread, however, Beijing has launched its own “Health Silk Road”, providing masks, test kits, and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to countries around the world. Under a so-called “face mask diplomacy”, countless nations across Southeast Asia and beyond became beneficiaries of medical assistance from China, which successfully
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Richard Javad Heydarian
is a non-resident fellow at Stratbase ADR Institute, and a columnist for the Philippine Daily Inquirer, and a resident political analyst at GMA Network. He has authored close to 1000 articles on regional security issues, three authored books on geopolitics, and writes widely for regional and international publications. Parts of this paper were drawn from his earlier works for the US-China Focus and Straits Times, where he is a regular contributor.
contained the epidemic at home. From Jakarta to Manila, Chinese donations and medical experts were warmly welcomed by senior officials amid much fanfare. In late March, Beijing delivered 40 tons of medical equipment to Indonesia, Southeast Asia’s largest and among the region’s worst Covid-19 impacted nations. Media reports characterized China’s delivery of masks, swabs and test kits with boxes emblazoned with China’s flag, more as a public relations exercise than an emergency aid intervention.8

Similar scenes have played out across the region, as Southeast Asian governments graciously participated in Chinese embassy-organized events to effectively celebrate the delivery of desperately-needed medical assistance. With US President Donald Trump’s administration still focused on containing its Covid-19 outbreak, the most lethal worldwide, and the virus-hit Pentagon suspending deployments to the region, China effectively used the provision of medical assistance to seize the post-Covid-19 high ground. The Philippine government applauded China’s provision of medical aid, with President Rodrigo Duterte twice personally thanking Chinese President Xi Jinping for his support in nationally televised addresses. China has donated 100,000 testing kits, 10,000 personal protective equipment suits (PPEs), 10,000 N95 grade masks, 100,000 surgical masks and deployed a team of 12 Chinese medical experts to assist the Philippines, which is struggling with one of the region’s worst outbreaks.9

“I don’t know if I have to say this but I have a sort of a note from President Xi Jinping expressing his full support for us at this time...” Duterte said during a mid-April national address. “It’s not their fault it came from [Wuhan] – who would really want to invent a microbe to kill humankind, including your own [people]...So he says that they are ready and I would like to thank President Xi Jinping for his support,” Duterte added.10 It’s not immediately clear if that message was delivered at Beijing’s behest, but it adheres to China’s narrative on the origins and trajectory of the pandemic as it seeks to deflect responsibility for the global spread of the deadly virus.11 During the early stages of the pandemic, many Southeast Asian countries, with the notable exceptions of Singapore and Vietnam, kept their borders open to Chinese visitors despite early reports of the epidemic. Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen publicly shunned imposing travel restrictions against China while playing down Covid-19’s threat. Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha’s government was roundly criticized for prioritizing economics over public health before finally closing the Kingdom’s borders. This may reflect the region’s economic dependence on Chinese trade, investment and tourism. China is the region’s largest trading partner, a relationship is bidding to expand through its US$1 trillion Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).12
The Trump administration, in contrast, come under heavy criticism for its perceived as paltry Covid-19 assistance to the region, announced at US$18.3 million with earmarks for lab-testing and infection control. The US has also been criticized for competing with allies for medical equipment and blocking the export of US-made face masks. That low aid figure stands in stark contrast to previous US administrations which provided as much as US$3.5 billion in health assistance to Southeast Asia for various health causes and research. Nonetheless, American officials have gone on the offensive, questioning the true intentions behind the ‘facemask diplomacy’. Washington has openly warned regional partners and allies to think twice before welcoming Chinese assistance.13

R. Clarke Cooper, the State Department’s Assistant Secretary for Political-Military Affairs, has described China’s assistance as a Trojan horse, which may undermine national security interests: “On the surface, I think the question partners should ask is, ‘Is this an altruistic measure?’ But we, as we’ve said on things like infrastructure investment, foreign investment, and arms sales, is caveat emptor—buyer beware.”14 The top Pentagon official raised alarm bells over potential security concessions by beneficiary nations, as China’s neighbors scramble to contain epidemic outbreaks at home. “There is a concern that we would not want any significant U.S. defense articles or sensitive systems to be at risk of exposure or exploitation,” the Pentagon official said in an interview with Foreign Policy magazine in April, trying to dissuade regional states from striking new defense agreements and purchase advanced telecommunications equipment from China.15

Michael George DeSombre, US Ambassador to Thailand, in turn, penned an op-ed critical of China, warning “when the crisis finally abates, we should take stock of the outcome and evaluate the costs of this breakdown” in international collaboration and the effects of suppressing virus-related information. In a critical reference to China and its lack of remorse for the pandemic’s spread, he reiterated that “a government’s duty is to save lives, not save face.”16 While America’s criticism of China’s ‘face mask diplomacy’ were largely ignored, few could turn a blind eye to the developments elsewhere.

Naked Opportunism

By March, when the Covid-19 pandemic was mostly contained in China but wreaking havoc on the United States, Beijing rapidly stepped up its military moves in the hotly contested South China Sea. It first started with major naval drills, including anti-submarine warfare, and deployment of large-scale military assets to the area, while at the same time officially Chinese scientists began celebrating strides made in exploiting disputed energy resources in the fossil fuel-rich sea. China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) flexed its naval muscles in the area through military exercises led by the country’s first aircraft carrier, the Liaoning. “Under difficult sea conditions in the early spring in the Bohai Strait, multiple J-15 fighter jets took off from the flight deck of the Liaoning and successfully landed several hours later, indicating the success of the technique rehabilitation training for instructors at Naval Aviation University,” announced the PLA Daily on March 23. “Training for war preparedness will not be stopped even in the middle of the Covid-19 epidemic, and the training of carrier-based fighter pilots must continue.”17
True to form, China’s state media tried to portray the sea exercises as part of fighting the pandemic. “[A]n aircraft carrier is a large warship with many people concentrated in its cabins, making it vulnerable to infectious diseases. Being able to successfully conduct related missions indicated that the Liaoning has done a great job in controlling the epidemic,” Beijing-based naval expert Li Jie told the state-sponsored news portal Global Times. Known for its jingoistic headlines and editorials, the Global Times proudly announced, “China’s second aircraft carrier, the Shandong, also reported zero Covid-19 cases on February 17,” without specifying the latest situation. Then came announcements of major scientific strides in the disputed waters.

According to China’s Ministry of Natural Resources, China conducted its most successful extraction of natural gas from gas hydrates both in terms of volume and production within a single day in a contested northern region of the sea. The ministry trumpeted its “solid technical foundation for commercial exploitation” to become the first country in the South China Sea to exploit gas hydrates, mineral deposits at the bottom of oceans, by utilizing a horizontal well-drilling technique. The production process ran between February 17 to March 18, just as the coronavirus epidemic began to ravage countries across the Western world. China’s strides in energy development technology will likely only reinforce its bid to dominate, if not monopolize, vast untapped oil and gas deposits within its so-called ‘nine-dash’ line claim, which covers close to 85% of the South China Sea and overlaps with waters off Indonesia’s northern Natuna Islands.

While a degree of nationalistic posturing in a bid to rally its people during difficult Covid-19 times was quite expected, what took many by surprise is the sheer brazenness of Chinese opportunism. Clearly on display was this: China exploiting America’s weakened condition to secure new advantage in the hot spot theater, not to mention rival Southeast Asian claimants’ compromised strategic position as they contended with worsening Covid-19 outbreaks. By April, as the pandemic began to claim tens of thousands of lives across Asia and America, China keenly sought to build facts on the ground. Its State Council, the country’s chief administrative authority, announced the establishment of two new administrative districts in the South China Sea. In what the Chinese media described as a “major administrative move”, Beijing introduced on April 18 the Xisha and Nansha districts under the aegis of Sansha City, itself a new prefecture-level unity first established in 2012 on the Woody (Yongxing) Island in the sea’s Paracel island chain that China contests with Vietnam. Host to 1,800 permanent residents, Sansha covers around two million square kilometers of contested waters, rich maritime resources and a host of low-tide elevations, atolls, islets, rocks and artificial islands.

According to China’s state-run CGTN news network, the city currently covers “only around 20 square kilometers of land area now”, indicating to some analysts that China may have designs to expand and create new artificial islands in the area, as it has done elsewhere in the sea. The Nansha District will have jurisdiction over the Paracel Islands (Nansha) and be located at the Fiery Cross Reef, a feature China has militarized with an early warning radar site that is also claimed by the Philippines and Vietnam. The reef is widely viewed as China’s command-and-control center for operations in the contested Spratly Islands. The Xisha District, meanwhile, will administer the Paracel Islands (Xisha) and
Chinese experts and propagandists alike were quick to underscore the importance of the new administrative announcement. “Eight years after China set Sansha as a city-level administrative unit, it is now time to subdivide it with different districts to further fulfill the responsibility of safeguarding our national sovereignty,” Zhang Junshe, a researcher at the People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA) Naval Military Studies Research Institute, told the state-affiliated Global Times. Song Zhongping, another Chinese military expert, told the same Chinese news outlet that “As a city that administers the largest territory among Chinese cities, it is also responsible for managing islands, isles and waters – work that is complicated and sensitive. The newly established districts will help detail the current administrative work in the area and build Sansha into a better city.”

Following the April 7 visit by Jiang Chunlei, a psychology professor of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Naval Medical University, to Fiery Cross, the Asian powerhouse said it is now considering building advanced mental healthcare facilities. Chinese media and experts have largely portrayed the latest announcement as a logical progression of the country’s sprawling network of civilian and military facilities in the area, which are hosting an ever-larger number of personnel and seemingly permanent residents. If anything, China fortified its facilities in heavily-militarized and artificially-reclaimed in the South China Sea. China announced that it’s also establishing mental health facilities for its troops and personnel in the Spratly islands, where it has built three-kilometer-long airstrips and large military-civilian complexes on artificially reclaimed islands also claimed by neighboring countries.

Then came the harassment of smaller claimant states. In early-April, Vietnam accused China of sinking a fishing boat and apprehending two others in the northern portions of the South China Sea. Despite Duterte’s lavish praise for China, his country was not spared by the latter’s strategic opportunism. China deployed a giant coast guard ship to Philippine-claimed Scarborough Shoal. Over the following weeks, top defense officials in the Philippines also revealed that a Chinese warship harassed a Philippine frigate on routine mission earlier this year. The Philippine Navy’s BRP Conrado Yap detected “a radar contact of a gray-colored vessel,” which was later identified as a Chinese warship with bow number 514,
IN EARLY-APRIL, VIETNAM ACCUSED CHINA OF SINKING A FISHING BOAT AND APPREHENDING TWO OTHERS IN THE NORTHERN PORTIONS OF THE SOUTH CHINA SEA. DESPITE DUTERTE’S LAVISH PRAISE FOR CHINA, HIS COUNTRY WAS NOT SPARED BY THE LATTER’S STRATEGIC OPPORTUNISM. CHINA DEPLOYED A GIANT COAST GUARD SHIP TO PHILIPPINE-CLAIMED SCARBOROUGH SHOAL

according to the Philippine military’s West Command. It’s not clear whether the Chinese vessel belongs to the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) or, more likely, the armada of militia vessels operating in the area under Beijing’s command.

The Chinese vessel was reportedly equipped with a “gun control director” which “track targets and makes all the main guns ready to fire in under a second,” the Philippine military said. A Philippine official, speaking on condition of anonymity with The Associated Press, accused the Chinese warship of pointing “fire control radar” at the Philippine vessel, an aggressive maneuver which locks weapons on a target prior to firing shots. Another Filipino official described the near-encounter as “very hostile” and “unprovoked”, even though there were no actual fire exchanges. Sensing public outrage, Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin stepped up criticism of China, lashing out at what he described as “violations of international law and Philippine sovereignty.” The following day, the Philippines’ diplomatic chief adopted even harsher language by warning China: “Well we passed the test; I slapped them back. Don’t even dream of pointing anything at my country…unless you’re looking for a fight. I know my soldiers.”

Malaysia, the other major claimant state, was also not spared. China’s Haiyang Dizhi 8 survey ship continued hounding Malaysia’s Petronas company-operated West Capella drillship, which has been exploring for energy resources within Malaysia’s continental shelf. According to Malaysia’s The Star Online, a local security expert with knowledge of the situation claimed that China’s “Haiyang Dizhi 8 was flanked at one point on April 17 by more than ten Chinese vessels, including those belonging to maritime militia and the coast guard.” Vietnamese militia forces have also reportedly been operating in the area because Malaysia’s western continental shelf overlaps with Vietnam’s. Since last December, the three rival claimant states have stared down in the area, but the Covid-19 pandemic has severely hit smaller regional states which are grappling with large-scale lockdowns to contain their outbreaks. Malaysian authorities initially sought to downplay the situation, likely to prevent a further escalation tensions during a period of intense strategic uncertainty and concerns China may leverage the historic health crisis to consolidate its position in the contested sea. “We do not know its purpose but it is not carrying out any activities against the law,” Zubil Mat Som, the head of Malaysia’s maritime enforcement agency, said in reference to China’s surveying vessel, which has been operating within Malaysia’s 200 nautical miles exclusive economic zone in an interview with local media outlet Harian Metro.

Malaysia’s initially cautious diplomatic response, if not total silence, was understandable. Both Malaysia and the Philippines were already bogged down by a domestic crisis, and forced to place month-long lockdown on their administrative and commercial capitals to battle a nationwide outbreak. The Philippines’ situation was particularly stark. To begin, the government had to deploy large number of troops to man countless checkpoints across major cities, overstrecting an already overburdened military. President Rodrigo Duterte and top security officials including Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana were soon forced into self-imposed quarantines, when it became clear that Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) chief General Felimon Santos Jr was infected with the Covid-19. Shortly after, former AFP chief and current Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG) secretary was also found to be infected.

For the past decade, the South China Sea, in particular, has become a precarious site of growing superpower rivalry, putting into question decades-long peace and security in the Asia-Pacific region. Cognizant of China’s strategic opportunism and its own role as the post-war guarantor of regional liberal order, the US accused its Asian rival of “exploiting the distraction or vulnerability of other states to expand its unlawful claims in the South China Sea”, calling upon Beijing to instead “remain focused on supporting international efforts to combat the global pandemic.” But the US had to put muscle behind its rhetoric lest China would reshape the regional order with strategic impunity.

Power Vacuum

Historically, China has exhibited its penchant for opportunism, whenever it sensed a power vacuum in adjacent waters. Following the defeat of Imperial Japan, China quickly seized control of large number of contested islands in the
area. During the Cold War, as soon as the Soviet Union wavered on its alliance with Vietnam, China seized Vietnamese-claimed land features in the Spratlys following violent clashes. Years earlier, it also consolidated its control over the Paracels, when the then South Vietnam government was embroiled in a devastating war with the communist north. America’s withdrawal of military bases in the Philippines in early post-Cold War years was rapidly followed by China’s seizure of the Philippine-claimed Mischief Reef. In 2012, just years following the Great Recession’s devastating impact on America, China seized the Philippine-claimed Scarborough Shoal. This pattern of opportunism is well-established.

No wonder then, the Wuhan-originated pandemic presented China an enticing power vacuum to be exploited. As the Covid-19 pandemic ravaged America, the Pentagon’s sudden vulnerability to the lethal disease led to grounding vessels, suspending overseas deployments, locking down foreign military bases, and cancelling joint drills with regional allies. Covid-19’s rapid transmission among American military personnel raised hard new questions about the Pentagon’s readiness, including in regard to joint exercises and activities with allies and partners in Asia that tacitly aim to check and warn China through show of force. In late March, the total number of infections among the Pentagon’s personnel breached 1,000, including 633 service members. It marked a dramatic increase from a much lower number of 343 cases reported only days earlier. The rapid rise in infections forced US Defense Secretary Mark Esper on March 27 to place restrictions on further public announcements regarding the precise number of infected US military personnel, due to concerns such transparency could compromise operational security and be exploited by strategic adversaries, namely China, Russia and Iran. “Unit level readiness data for key military forces is information that is classified as a risk to operational security and could jeopardize operations and/or deterrence,” said Jonathan Hoffman, the Pentagon’s chief spokesman, on March 30. “If a commander believes that [the coronavirus] could affect the readiness of our strategic deterrent or strategic response forces, we understandably protect that information from public release and falling into the hands of our adversaries — as we expect they would do the same.”

In a scramble to contain the outbreak among its armed forces, the Pentagon raised its health protection condition, or HPCON, to Charlie, its second highest level, a designation which revealed sustained community transmission beyond targeted contact tracing. “Our curve is not flattening and that’s why we went to HPCON Charlie today, which includes restrictions on large gatherings and includes additional social distancing,” warned Air Force Brigadier General Paul Friedrichs, the joint staff surgeon. Esper also announced in late-March major travel restrictions, including a suspension of up to 60 days on overseas deployments, which includes both military and civilian personnel working for the Pentagon. That meant cancellation of dozens of pre-scheduled joint military activities and drills with allies and partners across the world. The only exception, Esper clarified, would be the drawdown now underway in Afghanistan, where the US has committed to reduce the number of troops to 600 within 135 days of signing a February deal with the Taliban. “The purpose is to make
sure that we’re not bringing the virus back home, infecting others, that we’re not spreading it around the military,” Esper announced in an unprecedented sweeping measure that is expected to heavily affect American military operations across the world.34

In fact, the US Navy’s Indo-Pacific Command was particularly hard hit by the pandemic. The most dramatic and desperate case of transmission was the US Navy aircraft carrier, The USS Theodore Roosevelt aircraft carrier, which reported more than 100 cases among its 4,000 personnel in early-April and was grounded in Guam amid an outbreak scare for the following month. The San Francisco Chronicle newspaper published a desperate plea by US Captain Brett Crozier, an officer aboard the aircraft carrier who had alerted the authorities about the urgency of the crisis. The then Acting Navy Secretary Thomas Modly admitted the severity of the crisis: “We’re very engaged in this, we’re very concerned about it and we’re taking all the appropriate steps.” And prospects ahead were at best uncertain, with Retired Admiral James Stavridis, former NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe, warning that “we should expect more such incidents because warships are a perfect breeding ground for coronavirus.”35

At the same time a deteriorating public health emergency at home required the Pentagon to divert personnel and resources to domestic containment operations, potentially to the detriment of overseas commitments and power projection. The Defense Production Act’s activation meant that US armed forces were now involved in provision of desperately needed medical equipment and kits, including ventilators36 and body bags,37 as overstretched US hospitals grappled with a steep rise in cases and deaths.38 Meanwhile, an unrestrained China stepped up its harassment of even American military assets in the Indo-Pacific. In April, a Chinese vessel escorting the Liaoning aircraft carrier during “mock battles” in the South China Sea reportedly maneuvered in an “unsafe and unprofessional way” against the US Navy guided-missile destroyer USS Mustin on a routine operation in the area, according to the Pentagon. The last time the US and China came this close to a clash on the high seas was in late 2018, when a Chinese warship maneuvered within less than 50 yards of the US guided-missile destroyer USS Decatur, which was conducting a routine Freedom of Navigation Operation (FONOP) in the sea’s contested Spratly island chain.39

Between March and May, there were “at least nine” incidents of “unsafe” encounters between the two sides’ armed forces in the South China Sea, according to Reed Werner, the US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Southeast Asia. “We do find the current trend line very worrisome,” Werner told Fox News in May, warning that “China continues to push forward” just “[a}s countries are focused inward” to battle the Covid-19 pandemic. “We continue to see Chinese destabilizing behavior in the South China Sea during the middle of the coronavirus pandemic,” the top American official added, describing Beijing’s expanding military and para-military activities in the area as part of a broader campaign to “intimidate and bully others.” The Pentagon official said that US warnings are “definitely not overblown” while
highlighting what he characterized as China’s “continued risky and escalatory behavior” against US forces in the sea.40

Drawing the Line

Despite mounting public health crisis at home and onboard one of its most iconic aircraft carriers, the US could not remain on the sidelines for far too long. By middle of April, it became clear that the Pentagon was preparing a pushback, deploying evermore frequently smaller yet nimble warships to China’s adjacent waters. In an indirect yet unmistakable support to China’s smaller rivals, the US Navy deployed two American warships, USS America and USS Bunker Hill, to the disputed areas in unmistakable support for Malaysia, with Australian frigate HMAS Parramatta joining along. The joint US-Australia maneuver was effectively a multilateral Freedom of Navigation Operation (FONOPs), arguably among the first if not the most high-profile operations of its kind.41 In late April, the USS Barry guided-missile destroyer sailed near the Paracel islands in a freedom of navigation operation. That was followed by the deployment of the guided-missile cruiser USS Bunker Hill, which conducted a similar operation in the contested Spratly islands. That was followed by multiple muscular deployments in early May, part of what Pentagon planners say is a new integrated and flexible strategy, one that is clearly aimed at checking China’s expansionist ambitions in the waterway. Specifically, the US Navy sent Littoral Combat Ships USS Montgomery (LCS-8), USNS Cesar Chavez (T-AKE-14) and USS Gabrielle Giffords (LCS-10), the latter of which is armed with 100 nautical-mile-range missiles.42

Despite the virus-caused suspension of multilateral exercises and foreign deployments due to Covid-19, the US Navy conducted drills in the Philippine Sea from May 2 to 8 which focused on reconnaissance and surveillance exercises as well as surface, subsurface and amphibious operations. According to a statement by the US Navy’s 7th fleet, based in Yokosuka, Japan, the aim of the exercises was to “develop warfighting concepts, improve maritime lethality, and enable real-world proficiency and readiness.”43 On May 15, the Pentagon deployed the USS Rafael Peralta Arleigh-Burke-class destroyer some 116 nautical miles off China’s coast near Shanghai, the second US destroyer to be seen in the more northerly Yellow Sea in less than a month. Significantly, the ships are geared for anti-aircraft and strike operations. The US show of force nominally aimed to enhance integrated response and interoperability among its surface and submarine forces but also clearly meant to send a muscular signal to China and reassure regional allies.44

Crucially the US Navy is not only increasing the frequency of warship deployments to the area, but also their coverage, with commanders and Pentagon outlets regularly publicizing the events and presenting them as a sign of its sustained commitment to the region’s security. Case in point is the US Defense Department’s repeated publicizing of air-ground operations by the Marine Corps 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit from the amphibious assault ship USS America during a mid-April mission in the South China Sea. “It looks to me that the [US] Navy’s efforts to highlight these operations has, in fact, picked up a bit,” Retired Navy Commander Bryan McGrath told Stars and Stripes magazine. “There is little doubt, however, that the pace of US Navy operations in China’s near abroad has picked up in the Trump administration as part of its overall signaling campaign to China.”45

At the same time, the US also stepped up its lawfare against China. In a note verbale (June 1) to the UN Secretary-General’s office, Kelly Craft, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations reiterated that it “objects to China’s claim to ‘historic rights’ in the South China Sea to the extent that claim exceeds the maritime entitlements that China could assert consistent with international law as reflected in the [United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea].” Describing China’s claims as “inconsistent with international law”, the US representative invoked the Philippines’ historic arbitration award in July 2016, where an arbitral tribunal at The Hague, formed under the aegis of the UNCLOS, nullified much of China’s claim. “The United States notes in this regard that the [Arbitral] Tribunal unanimously concluded in its ruling — which is final and binding on China and the Philippines under Article 296 of the Convention — that China’s claim to historic rights is incompatible with the Convention to the extent it exceeds the limits of China’s possible maritime zones as specifically provided for in the Convention,” the U.S. noted in its formal letter to the UN.46

The US’ pushback seems to have encouraged its regional partners. In a strongly-worded statement in late-April, Malaysia’s newly-installed foreign minister, and former defense minister, Hishammuddin Hussein reiterated “Malaysia remains firm in its commitment to safeguard its interests and rights in the South China Sea.”47 The following month, in a speech before the Malaysian Parliament, even the country’s King Al-Sultan Abdullah Ri’ayatuddin Al-Mustafa Billah Shah chimed in (May 18), imploring the government to pay greater attention to the disputes and
the necessity “to be always sensitive to the maritime domain, while crafting a strategy that supports our geopolitical aspirations.”

A month later, Indonesia submitted a note verbale (May 26) addressed to U.N. Secretary General Antonio Guterres, where it, for the first time, openly questioned China’s expansive claims in the South China Sea by invoking the Philippines’ arbitration award. “Indonesia reiterates that the nine-dash line map implying historic rights claim clearly lacks international legal basis and is tantamount to upset UNCLOS 1982,” Indonesia’s Permanent Mission to the United Nations, a major departure from the country’s decades-long studied ‘neutrality’ on the South China Sea disputes. “This view has also been affirmed by the Award of 12 July 2016 by the Tribunal that any historic rights that the People’s Republic of China may have had to the living and non-living resources were superseded by the limits of the maritime zones provided for by UNCLOS 1982,” the Indonesia note verbale added.

The most dramatic shift, however, took place in the Philippines. Duterte had to reconsider his earlier decision to terminate the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) with the US, a process that was expected to be finalized by August of this year following a 180-days termination window. In early June, Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr. announced that upon “the President’s instruction,” the termination process will be suspended for the foreseeable future. Initially, the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs vaguely cited “political and other developments in the region” as a basis for the dramatic policy turnabout. Soon, however, Philippine Ambassador to the US Jose Manuel Romualdez clarified that “quite a number of things that are happening right now in the South China Sea” may have forced Duterte’s hands. Surely, China’s brazen opportunism forced Duterte’s hands.

DESPITE MOUNTING PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS AT HOME AND ONBOARD ONE OF ITS MOST ICONIC AIRCRAFT CARRIERS, THE US COULD NOT REMAIN ON THE SIDELINES FOR FAR TOO LONG. BY MIDDLE OF APRIL, IT BECAME CLEAR THAT THE PENTAGON WAS PREPARING A PUSHBACK, DEPLOYING EVERMORE FREQUENTLY SMALLER YET NIMBLE WARSHIPS TO CHINA’S ADJACENT WATERS. IN AN INDIRECT YET UNMISTAKABLE SUPPORT TO CHINA’S SMALLER RIVALS, THE US NAVY DEPLOYED TWO AMERICAN WARSHIPS TO THE DISPUTED AREAS IN UNMISTAKABLE SUPPORT FOR MALAYSIA, WITH AUSTRALIAN FRIGATE HMAS PARRAMATTA JOINING ALONG.

The dramatic U-turn, however, should be seen as part of a wave of anxiety and anger against Chinese aggression and opportunism among the Philippines’ defense and foreign policy establishment. That sense of alarm was poignantly on display when the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs issued a “statement of solidarity” with Vietnam following the sinking of a Vietnamese boat by Chinese forces in April, while in May the Philippine military establishment condemned a Chinese warship’s “unprovoked” and “very hostile” pointing of a “radar gun” on a Philippine frigate earlier this year. And to fortify the Philippines’ position on the ground, Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana made a high-profile visit to the Spratlys in early-June, where he inaugurated a new beaching ramp on the Thitu Island and announced unprecedented efforts to repair and expand the Philippines’ civilian and military facilities in the area.

Moving forward, however, there are huge challenges. To begin with, countries should watch out for the possibility that China may shift from BRI projects to brazen ‘bargain hunting’ among troubled neighbors. With the pandemic hammering their economies, many regional governments will look to China for economic relief as the region slides into coronavirus-driven recession. In the Philippines, hundreds of thousands of Chinese workers have boosted an already shadowy multibillion dollar online casino industry, which in recent years has flooded government coffers and spurred economic growth. That dependence is bound to increase in coming months and years as the Duterte administration scrambles to shore up state resources. Shortly before imposing a month-long lockdown on Manila, Duterte openly called on China for assistance: “To the Chinese government, to the people, especially to President Xi Jinping, thank you for the consoling words and maybe, I hope that it would not reach to that point but maybe we will need your help.” Individual nations, especially those with territorial disputes with China, should ensure their strategic sectors are protected from predatory purchases during the crisis. There are also geopolitical challenges, namely the prospect of a Chinese Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the South China Sea as well as reclamation of the Scarborough Shoal. While current developments have punctured any illusion about China’s supposed ‘peaceful rise’, it also underscores the need for robust strategic cooperation among like-minded regional players to preserve and protect a rules-based international order. To this end, American leadership is more vital than ever, especially since smaller partners and allies are struggling to resist Beijing on their own. Otherwise, a resurgent China will shape the emerging post-pandemic order to the exclusion of smaller nations as well as external powers.
Coast Of Shanghai As PLA Navy Starts 11-Week Drill. 

US Navy Submarines Join Surface Ships And Aircraft In Interoperability Exercise. 


China Sea Aimed At Quelling Doubts Over Post-Virus Readiness, Analysts Say. [online] Stars and Stripes. 


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9th Floor 6780 Ayala Avenue,
Makati City 1220

Y (632) 892.1751
F (632) 892.1754

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