
The Military–Strategic Situation in and around the South China Sea

The nations surrounding the South China Sea (SCS) now constitute a leading consumer of arms, and increasingly some of the most modern and most advanced armaments are finding their way into the inventories of Asian militaries. As a result, many Asian-Pacific militaries have experienced a significant, if not unprecedented, build-up over the past several years, in terms of quantity and quality.

The nations surrounding the South China Sea (SCS) now constitute a leading consumer of arms, and increasingly some of the most modern and most advanced armaments are finding their way into the inventories of Asian militaries. As a result, many Asian-Pacific militaries have experienced a significant, if not unprecedented, build-up over the past several years, in terms of quantity and quality.

This arms-acquisition process has been impelled by a number of strategic and economic factors. The drive for great power status, whether regionally or globally, has pushed many countries in the area to strengthen their militaries. These developments have, in turn, sparked competition in arming and counter-arming – even drawing in those countries that seek only to acquire improved defences against increasingly assertive, well-armed neighbours. Regional great-power machinations have been further complicated by the United States’ renewed interest in the Asia-Pacific, as evidenced by Washington’s “pivot to Asia” and its subsequent growing military presence.

At the same time, rising regional defence budgets, driven by growing economies, together with a buyer’s market in the global arms marketplace offering almost every type of advanced weaponry,

have made it possible for most nations in the Asia-Pacific to acquire modern armaments. This combination of strategic competition, rising regional wealth, and the growing availability of advanced conventional weaponry has created a “harmonic convergence” underwriting one of the most far-reaching arms build-ups in the world.

The Political-Military Context behind Regional Military Modernisation

The nations surrounding the South China Sea have many reasons for acquiring new defence hardware and improving national military capabilities. The region is clearly one of constantly shifting security dynamics, with rising great powers, new threats and security challenges (missile attacks, terrorism, the proliferation of WMD systems, international crime, and the like), ongoing territorial disputes, and new military commitments (such as disaster relief, humanitarian assistance, and contingency and stabilisation operations) that require new capabilities for power projection, mobility, firepower, intelligence and surveillance, and joint operations. All of these factors, in one way or another, are affecting regional military modernisation activities.

China, in particular, possesses great power aspirations that drive much of its requirements for a modern military, particularly when it comes to projecting sustained power beyond its border, delivering firepower, and dominating information battlespace. Beijing, for example, seeks to gain hard power commensurate with its growing soft power (i.e., economic, diplomatic, and cultural). These goals are clearly apparent in China’s increasingly assertive, even belligerent, behaviour in the South China Sea. Beijing is actively engaged in significantly militarising the SCS, including aggressive patrolling by naval and para-naval forces; the dramatic expansion of military defences (e.g., long-range surface-to-air missiles) on Woody Island, China’s largest possession in the South China Sea; and, in particular, an ambitious artificial island-building program that has taken place in the Spratlys over the last few years, including construction of runways on at least three reefs, emplacement of radar stations, and even the temporary movement of weapons to these islands.

At the same time, China is keen to build expeditionary forces capable of projecting power out to the “second island chain,” which is delineated by Guam, Indonesia, and Australia. Eventually, it hopes to be able to project sustainable force throughout the whole of the Western Pacific and into the Indian Ocean. In particular, this goal has led Beijing to deemphasise ground forces in favour of building up the naval, air, and missile forces of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA).

According to its 2015 white paper, the PLA will continue to de-emphasise land operations, all but abandoning People’s War (except in name and in terms of political propaganda), particularly in favour of seapower and force projection: “The traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned, and great importance has to be attached to managing the seas and oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests.” As a result, the PLA Navy (PLAN) “will gradually shift its focus from ‘offshore waters defence’ to the combination of ‘offshore waters defence’ with ‘open seas protection,’” an evolutionary development from what was announced in the 2006 white paper, which proclaimed that the “Navy aims at gradual extension of the strategic depth for offshore defensive operations.” This will require a “combined, multi-functional and efficient marine combat force structure. The PLAN will enhance its capabilities for strategic deterrence and counterattack, maritime maneuvers, joint operations at sea, comprehensive defense and comprehensive support.”

China’s military rise has helped to spark Sino–American competition in the far western Pacific Ocean, and particularly in the South China Sea. At the beginning of 2012, the Obama administration formally promulgated its new “pivot,” or rebalancing, back to the Asia-Pacific region. The pivot indicates a consequential realignment of US global power, emphasising air- and sea-based operations in an “arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia.” In particular, this rebalancing involves the redeployment of US forces from other parts of the world. The US Navy (USN) plans to position 60 per cent of its fleet in the Pacific Ocean, compared to a current 50/50 division between the Pacific and the Atlantic

Oceans. In addition, 2,500 US Marines are to be based in Darwin, Australia, while Singapore has agreed to host up to four of the new USN Littoral Combat Ships. Finally, the United States has expanded its access to ports and other facilities in the Philippines and Vietnam.

As part of the pivot, in late 2009 the US Navy and Air Force have undertaken to develop a new joint operational concept, initially dubbed AirSea Battle (ASB), later redesignated the “Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons” (JAM-GC). ASB/JAM-GC is intended to preserve stability and to sustain US power projection and freedom of action, and to offset current and anticipated asymmetric threats through a novel integration of US Air Force and Navy’s concepts, assets, and capabilities. ASB/JAM-GC appears to be specifically designed to counterbalance Beijing’s growing strength and influence in the region, especially given China’s increasing capacity for anti-access/area denial (A2/AD).

In Southeast Asia there is growing unease over China’s “creeping assertiveness” in the SCS and its growing military presence in the region. Additionally, Southeast Asian countries face new unconventional threats, particularly piracy, terrorism, international crime, and human trafficking. At the same time, many Southeast Asian states are often as suspicious of one-another as they are of external powers such as China, with historical animosities continuing between Malaysia and Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, and Thailand and Burma, to name but a few. Moreover, competing claims over EEZs in the SCS and over the Spratly Islands are just as strong between the various Southeast Asian nations as they are between these nations and Beijing. Consequently, these tensions have been powerful motivators behind recent national military build-ups in the region, especially when it comes to acquiring capabilities – particularly long-range naval and air forces – for patrolling and protecting EEZs and promoting sovereignty rights.

Richard A. Bitzinger is Senior Fellow and Coordinator of the Military Transformations Program at the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

The paper was presented at the Conference: "The South China Sea in the Broader Maritime Security of the Indo-Pacific Conference", 28-30 September 2016, Canberra, Australia. This conference is co-organized by UNSW Canberra at the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA), the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam (DAV), and the Japan Institute for International Affairs (JIIA).

Click [here](#) for full text.