

BACKGROUNDER

No. 3539 | OCTOBER 8, 2020

CENTER FOR NATIONAL DEFENSE

Decisive Theaters: Navy Must Pick the Right Fights in Great-Power Competition

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

The lack of sufficient naval capacity to contest all challenges to American maritime dominance forces the U.S. to focus on achieving the greatest strategic impact.

By challenging the U.S. below the level of armed conflict, Russia and China are avoiding U.S. military strength by operating in blind spots. This must change.

The two decisive theaters where the Navy should show up and sustain a significant presence are the South China Sea and Eastern Mediterranean.

In 1987, during President Ronald Reagan's Cold War buildup in the final showdown with the Soviet Union, the U.S. Navy peaked at 594 ships. Today, to confront two global revisionist powers, China and Russia, our Navy possesses 298 ships. While Russia's navy has remained focused on maintaining a dangerous submarine fleet and has "kalibr'ized"¹ its smaller surface ships with lethal cruise missiles, China's navy has grown and modernized at a remarkable rate: It numbers 300 ships today and is on track to reach more than 425 by 2030. Until the U.S. fleet grows in size, securing our national interests requires that our overtaxed Navy be able to focus its presence with precision in order to compete effectively against both navies.

The 2017 National Security Strategy states that China and Russia are using economic, political, and military means to shape a world that is antithetical to U.S. values and interests.² The 2018 National Defense

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/bg3539>

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Strategy further makes clear that China and Russia are the foremost challenges, necessitating our commitment to long-term strategic competition.³

This is a competition that is playing out below or skirting the threshold of armed conflict and is changing geopolitical realities with dire consequences for the nation's security and prosperity. Well-known examples include China's massive island building campaign in the South China Sea and Russia's use of "little green men" special forces⁴ in Crimea. Such a competition requires that our military be able to execute a broad and coherent response. For a Navy that is undersized to meet all security requirements, it is imperative that the right mix of forces be placed in strategically significant regions and sustained for lasting effect.

Peacetime action taken in decisive theaters, like pressure points in the martial art Aikido, can enable an economy of force to induce a competitor to change behavior. Naval operations in the Eastern Mediterranean and South China Sea can have just such an effect on Russia and China. By contesting the U.S. below the level of armed conflict, both of these great-power competitors avoid our military strengths by operating in one of our Navy's blind spots. This must change.

In this competition, the Department of Defense and Navy must deploy a persistent naval force in decisive theaters: the South China Sea and Eastern Mediterranean. This will enable our small Navy to secure national interests, attract security partner nations, and bolster alliances. At stake is a global rules-based order—premised on international law and long-standing customs that benefit large and small nations alike—that encourages arbitration over conflict. It is a global framework championed by and beneficial to the U.S. without which it becomes a legal fiction. In time, as the Navy grows, operations in these theaters will inform military posture, capability investments, and diplomatic initiatives that further enhance the Navy's role in great-power competition.

The Eastern Mediterranean

Throughout its history, from Catherine the Great through the Soviets, Russia has attempted to secure lasting footholds in the Eastern and Central Mediterranean. Securing such a position would enable Russia to threaten the southern flank of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and implement a counter-encirclement strategy. In line with Czarist Russian thinking, the Soviets maintained the 5th Eskadra (squadron) in the Eastern Mediterranean as a regional bulwark and to defend their southern flank from NATO.⁵

During the 1973 Yom Kippur War, the Soviet and U.S. navies squared off in support of their respective Middle Eastern partners. The fundamental value of the Eastern Mediterranean was clearly understood by leaders on both sides, and after the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia made sure that it retained a fiduciary level of access to the region. However, not until its September 2015 entry into Syria's civil war had there been a significant, prolonged Russian naval presence there. To sustain its renewed regional presence, Russia and Syria concluded a deal that allowed Russia to operate up to 11 warships out of its only overseas naval base at Tartus, Syria, until 2066.⁶

Beyond the obvious support for ally Bashar al-Assad's regime, Tartus gives the Russian Navy a springboard for sustained operations further afield and the potential to diminish NATO's relevance in addressing such broader European security concerns as the flow of refugees from Libya and Syria.⁷ It is a mission that is part of a larger counter-encirclement strategy, with the Russian Navy providing coercive power projection from a range of small surface ships and nuclear submarines armed with 1,000-mile-range kalibr cruise missiles and conveying a conventional ability surpassing that possessed by the Soviets during the Cold War and able to hold the U.S. homeland at risk.

While kalibr missiles provide a means for effective measured coercion, however, actual use against a NATO member or the U.S. would risk the Russian regime's survival, thus motivating it to ensure that any crisis remains below the level of open conflict with the U.S. Such strategic calculation makes overt aggression against a NATO member state in the Baltic or Eastern Europe unlikely.⁸ At the same time, this renewed regional naval presence bolsters energetic efforts by Russia to burnish its great-power status while weakening the unity of its principal threat: NATO.

NATO members have already shown susceptibility to Russian influence. Examples include Greece's past support for weakening sanctions on Russia,⁹ Turkey's purchase of advanced Russian arms,¹⁰ and Russia's increasing involvement in Libya's civil war through its proxy leader Khalifa Haftar.¹¹ Internal NATO disputes such as that playing out in the Eastern Mediterranean between Greece and Turkey over maritime rights afford Russia yet another avenue for sowing discord and weakening the alliance.¹² The confluence of security concerns, fraying alliances, and long-standing Russian interests makes this region an important maritime arena for great-power competition.

A dedicated U.S. naval force in the Eastern Mediterranean would complicate Russian military adventurism, contribute to mitigating Russia's malign influence, and bolster security commitments to NATO and Israel. Additionally, such a force would be well placed to back up NATO maritime forces in

the Black Sea.¹³ Perhaps most important, it would have a deterrent effect on Russia from Tripoli to Tehran, Crimea to Aden. As a guardian of the Suez Canal and the Black Sea, such a force would be a strong guarantor, as well as customer, that ensured access to critical ports that are increasingly operated by Chinese state-owned entities such as Greece's port of Piraeus.

The South China Sea

The main “strategic direction” of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)—unification with Taiwan—informs its military modernization and expansion measured against the U.S. military.¹⁴ It is an elusive goal requiring the Peoples' Liberation Army (PLA) to take on the U.S. and its network of Asian allies. It also remains beyond the PLA's ability...for now. The CCP has therefore pursued an indirect and long-term approach to supplanting the U.S. as a regional economic and military power, thereby setting the conditions for the successful return of Taiwan, preferably without firing a shot.

Backed by impressive anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) capabilities, this has been called China's “counter intervention” strategy.¹⁵ The key to this strategy is dominion over the South China Sea and its critical sea lanes, the greater consequence being, as Robert Kaplan argues in *Asia's Cauldron*, that this would make China the hegemon of the Indo-Pacific.¹⁶ If the U.S. continues its past reactive or relatively passive approach to this peacetime contest, it runs the risk of miscommunicating its interests, thereby increasing the risk of miscalculation on China's part and potentially resulting in a long and costly war.

Events of the early post–Cold War era confirm this view. Ever since the departure of U.S. forces from bases in the Philippines in 1991, there has been a notable increase in China's encroachment and provocations in the South China Sea. This started with China's occupation and construction of facilities on the Philippines' Mischief Reef in 1994, further expanded in 1999, and culminated in 2015's massive island-building campaign.¹⁷

Such activities in the South China Sea contribute to China's “counter intervention” strategy in two key ways: They bolster the isolation of Taiwan both diplomatically and militarily, and they enhance the PLA Navy's posture in the event of war over Taiwan. Chinese island-building and militarization have culminated only recently, despite promises to the contrary by Chairman Xi Jinping to President Barack Obama in 2015. The result is that China now has an archipelago of manmade islands with naval and air bases backing what Secretary of State Michael Pompeo has called China's illegal maritime claims.¹⁸

Similar to Russia's aversion to NATO, China has used U.S. ambivalence regarding maritime disputes to weaken U.S. security partnerships and undermine Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) unity. And the cracks are growing:

- ASEAN's 10-nation consensus has split over the issue,¹⁹
- Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has walked away from a win in maritime arbitration against China,²⁰ and
- Thailand has drifted deeper into China's orbit with arms purchases since the downgrading of U.S. military relationship following a 2014 coup.²¹

This trend is fueled by China's growing military presence and significant and expanding economic inroads, spearheaded by its Maritime Silk Road and Silk Road Economic Belt, both of which are part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); 24 percent (\$147 billion) of all BRI investment and construction contracts through 2018 have gone to Southeast Asia, led by Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Laos.²² With ASEAN unity uncertain and security partners questioning U.S. commitments in the face of increasingly aggressive Chinese activities, and given ASEAN's economic importance to the U.S. (fourth largest trading partner after Canada, Mexico, and China) and China (second largest trading partner after the U.S.), the South China Sea is also a critical maritime arena for great-power competition.

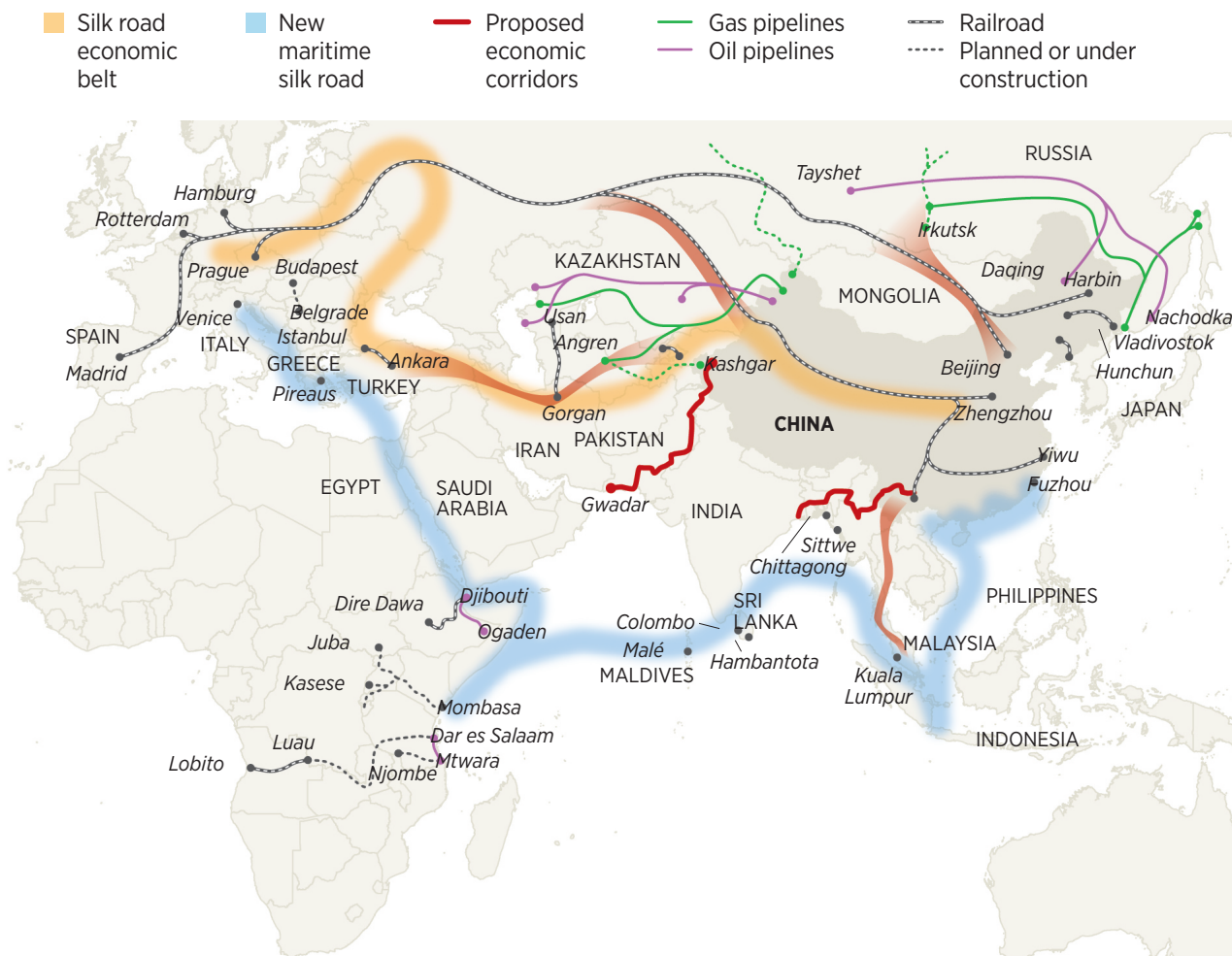
A significant and sustained naval presence in the South China Sea could do much to bolster the rules-based order and instill needed regional confidence in U.S. commitments. Such a force would restore military balance to a region that has edged precipitously closer to China in the past 15 years, disadvantaging America's influence and making its allies and key partner nations more susceptible to Chinese pressure.

An unmistakable U.S. naval presence near China's rich industrial Pearl River Delta and naval stronghold on Hainan Island would be more than a military deterrent; it would be a force to shape behavior at sea. In addition, Chinese military operations in response to the U.S. presence would afford critical insight into PLA operational patterns. It is, of course, important to recognize as well that this force would operate at risk if such capabilities as the DF-26 and DF-21D anti-ship ballistic missiles recently tested in these waters were to lead to war.²³

MAP 1

China's Belt and Road Initiative

Through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China endeavors to reshape the economic and geopolitical landscape of Eurasia and the Indian Ocean with an unprecedented wave of infrastructure investments. However, in America, Australia, Europe, and India, concerns about the BRI are growing.



SOURCES: "Reviving the Silk Road," Reuters, May 10, 2017, map, <https://pictures.reuters.com/archive/CHINA-SILKROAD--C-ETIED5A1MD43P.html> (accessed July 3, 2018), and Heritage Foundation research.

On numerous occasions, China's interactions with U.S. military aircraft and warships have been considerably more cordial than the language it has used and the posture it has assumed vis-à-vis other nations. This indicates that a strong U.S. naval presence might be able to moderate China's maritime

behavior, bolster confidence in the rules-based order, and embolden U.S. partner nations in Southeast Asia to enforce their legal economic rights at sea and safeguard their own maritime resources without interference from the Chinese maritime militia, coast guard, or Peoples' Liberation Army Navy. A U.S. naval presence, by complicating force-on-force calculations and contesting vital air and sea invasion routes, would also have a strong deterrent effect on Chinese designs to invade Taiwan.

The China–Russia Nexus

In July 2021, the current Russia–China Friendship and Cooperation Treaty will come to an end, having met its original objectives such as settling border disputes (completed in 2008) and facilitating trade in military equipment and raw materials.²⁴ With renegotiation in both parties' interest, on June 5, 2019, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin issued a joint statement in Moscow committing both countries to an upgraded “comprehensive strategic partnership for a new era.”²⁵

Days later, a Russian destroyer had an unsafe and unprofessional interaction with a U.S. guided-missile cruiser (the USS *Chancellorsville*) in the Philippine Sea. Then, in July 2019, Russian and Chinese long-range bombers, for the first time operating together, circumnavigated Takeshima/Dokto Island in the Sea of Japan, possession of which is in dispute between Japan and South Korea. Most troubling were the ensuing recriminations between U.S. allies Japan and South Korea, which were about their armed forces operating in disputed airspace rather than about Russian and Chinese activities.²⁶

Confronted by two great-power competitors, the U.S. will have to balance and synchronize its activities and not be distracted as China or Russia seek opportunistic gains on opposite ends of the world. This is a serious risk because these two revisionist powers appear intent on increasingly coordinating maritime operations. At the same time, both China and Russia are active in the South China Sea and Eastern Mediterranean with interests that do not always align, an example being Russia's military arms sales to Vietnam,²⁷ and China is on track to dedicate over \$1 trillion by 2027 to developing its Maritime Silk Road, which begins and ends in these two decisive theaters.²⁸

To employ our Navy to greatest effect in this global strategic contest over a rules-based order and influence, a new framework is needed that leverages naval power as an active element of statecraft. A hint of this framework played out recently in the South China Sea.

This year, a remarkable months-long display of U.S. maritime power occurred in the South China Sea. It started in late April, with USS *Gabrielle Giffords* patrolling in the vicinity of the Panamanian-flagged *West Capella* as it conducted deep-water surveys in Malaysia's exclusive economic zone (EEZ), which is disputed by China. Operational tempo built up to include Air Force bombers in May and culminated in July with sustained dual aircraft carrier South China Sea operations: a first since 2012.²⁹

On July 13, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo issued the first clear statement of U.S. views on China's claims: They are unlawful.³⁰ In an important refinement of long-standing talking points "supporting freedom of navigation and overflight" as the rationale for these operations, Seventh Fleet Commander Vice Admiral Bill Merz added that "[t]he U.S. supports the efforts of our allies and partners in the lawful pursuit of their economic interests."³¹ Given the economic nature of the *West Capella's* survey operations, such statements, adroitly matched with naval presence, have resonated with our partners in tangible ways, as shown subsequently by:

- Indonesia's naval drills in the South China Sea,³²
- The Philippines' change of mind to leverage its 2016 maritime arbitration win against China,³³
- Malaysia's protest note to the United Nations regarding China's excessive claims,³⁴ and
- Vietnam's support while it was the ASEAN chair.³⁵

While prioritizing presence in decisive theaters, the Navy clearly will have to be present in other places and respond occasionally to crises elsewhere. However, that must not detract from maintaining a persistent presence in the decisive theaters. The mechanism in the Department of Defense for ensuring this is called Global Force Management (GFM).³⁶

Notable secondary maritime theaters where the Navy will have to balance its presence include the Norwegian Sea, the Central Pacific, the Caribbean Sea, the Gulf of Guinea, the Indian Ocean, and Northeast Asia. Today, however, the GFM process is driven by risk calculations of the geographic combatant commands such as Central Command, which is responsible for the Middle East. Each geographic command is responsible for ensuring adequate forces for potential war and near-term military objectives in its particular corner of the world. GFM therefore

prejudices force assignments to the detriment of effecting a long-term global competitive strategy. Potential remedies for this include reform of GFM processes, formal establishment of naval task forces, and creation of named operations to ensure that adequate naval forces are sustained in decisive theaters.

What the U.S. Should Do

In this peacetime contest, there will be no decisive battles to signal “mission accomplished.” Great-power competition is a condition of our era, marked by little wins and losses that are evident in adjustments and recalculations. It is an enduring condition characterized by competition, not a race with a distinct or convenient endpoint. The arena of great-power competition will involve such elements as the rules-based norms of maritime behavior. In this competition, the U.S. confronts two traditional land powers, which the U.S. Navy presents as an asymmetric challenge requiring both initiative and flexibility.

The first step in competing is to show up, and the two decisive theaters where the Navy should show up and sustain a significant presence are the South China Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean. To this end, the Department of Defense and the Navy should:

- **Establish dedicated U.S. naval task forces in the South China Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean.** These task forces must draw on lessons learned from experiences of the Combined Joint Task Force Horn of Africa and Central Command’s Naval Task Forces. This will require new command structures that are appropriate for executing a global competitive strategy relative to China and Russia. Initially, to ensure this focus and avoid alienating some partners that are sensitive to participating in great-power competition, these task forces should be limited to U.S. participation. Only after measurable successes have been registered should allies be included.
- **Reform the GFM process to ensure that force employment is aligned to strategic objectives and specific National Defense Strategy end states.** This will assign greater priority to military forces—principally the South China Sea and Eastern Mediterranean task forces recommended above—in support of peacetime operations involving great-power competition.

- **Educate the next generation of Department of Defense civilian and military leaders in great-power competition.** Secretary of Defense Dr. Mark Esper has directed that the National Defense University devote 50 percent of coursework to China. Such direction is needed, but it also risks being too narrowly focused. The Department of Defense and military leaders need to be prepared to compete with both Russia and China in peacetime and wartime, and this will require a full appreciation of the nuances of securing and maintaining advantage through the synchronized pursuit of soft and hard national power.

Conclusion

Great-power competition is currently playing out below armed conflict, avoiding the might of the U.S. military. That said, the Navy in recent times has played a key peacetime role in effecting strategic change: Its response to 2008's cyclone Nargis, for example, began a chain of events that led to normalized relations and democratization in Myanmar, and 2004's tsunami relief efforts in Indonesia led to greatly improved relations and renewed military engagement. Despite this, China and Russia have proven to be adept at keeping U.S. responses muted or irrelevant as they change facts on the ground and at sea, often by leveraging economic largesse, lucrative arms deals, or outright coercion.

A new game plan is needed. As The Heritage Foundation's James Carafano has stated, "employing military force without a guiding idea is like a blind man playing ice hockey."³⁷ To be clear, the Navy must retain the ability to fight and win wars, but this by itself is meaningless without development of an effective competitive approach to winning the peacetime contest. Sustaining a naval presence in the decisive South China Sea and Eastern Mediterranean theaters enables a proactive competitive strategy.

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