

Conflict Scenarios

between the United States and
China at Sea

Edited by KIMS





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Thank you, Olivia, for your valuable contribution in correcting the book.
Your help is greatly appreciated!

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Foreword

Conflict Scenarios of the U.S.-China Conflict at Sea

Over the past several years, the U.S.-China strategic competition has been intensifying, with the maritime domain emerging as an arena of U.S.-China strategic competition. Chinese domination of China's near-seas region—meaning the South China Sea (SCS), the East China Sea (ECS), the Taiwan Strait, and the West Sea—could cause great harm to the peace and stability of the Indo-Pacific region, which accounts for about 60 percent of the world's maritime trade. Unlike conflicts on land that are less likely to occur but can quickly escalate into full-scale warfare, maritime conflicts tend to be limited warfare but more frequent.

This book addresses the conflict scenarios of the U.S.-China conflicts at sea and their implications. It is both timely and relevant, if not urgent. I am confident that readers from both Korea and overseas will find this book extremely helpful in understanding the importance of maritime security. The Korea Institute for Maritime Strategy (KIMS) is a private non-profit think tank, founded upon the principle of raising awareness of the importance of the sea, contributing to the development of sound maritime policy and ultimately working towards a more secure and peaceful world. For this purpose, the institute seeks to identify and analyze some of the latest and pressing issues pertaining to the maritime domain.

This book is a testimony of very close teamwork between renowned experts in Europe and the U.S. I am thankful to Mr. Sanghoon Kim for the introduction and summary of the chapters. Words cannot sufficiently express my gratitude to the chapter contributors each of whom provides breath-taking knowledge, thus helping the readers understand what is happening now and what might be expected in the conflict scenarios between the United States and China at sea. In the order of the book chapter, I hereby acknowledge Dr. Terence Roehrig, Dr. Paul van Hooft, Dr. Tim Sweijs, Ms. Stella Kim, Dr. Ketian Zhang, and Mr. Wade Turvold. I am also grateful to Ms. Olivia Truesdale for editing and proofreading this book.

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01

Introduction: The Utility of Scenarios and the Implications of the U.S.-China Conflict at Sea

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About the Report

This policy report consists of three chapters that discuss conflict scenarios between the United States and China at sea. The three chapters represent three maritime domains: the South China Sea, the East China Sea and the West Sea. The utility of scenario-based research extends beyond practical values.

The informed scenarios, or *narrative approximations of potential future conflicts*, also assist scholars with “developing testable hypotheses, gathering data, and identifying a theory’s upper and lower bounds.”¹ For security practitioners, this policy report can be used in many ways. First, it can be used as a basis for conducting wargames. A wargame is, broadly defined, a simulation of a future warfare situation. The military conducts regular joint and combined exercises which are essentially wargames that are intended to increase military preparedness and coordination through table-top exercises, command post exercises (CPX) or field training exercises

¹ Timothy J. Junio and Thomas G. Mahnken, “Conceiving of Future War: The Promise of Scenario Analysis for International Relations,” *International Studies Review* 15 (2013), 374.

(FTX). The scenarios explored in this volume not only encompass the United States and China, but also Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and Southeast Asian countries, depending on the maritime domain and the conflict. For instance, in an East China Sea scenario, Japan is likely to be one of the main actors involved in a dispute over the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands. As such, the conflict scenarios laid out in this policy report can be used by practitioners in many countries tailored to their own security environment. The policy implications included in every chapter guide practitioners into considering different pathways toward war. The debate on the causes of war remains unresolved and will remain so, due to the nature of individuals, society, and the state. Different levels of analysis all provide plausible explanations to the causes of war. Indeed, it is the combination of a multitude of factors that drive decision makers to rely on the last resort of war as a means to achieving a political end. Even today, in an age of globalization where economic interdependence, nuclear deterrence, and multilateralism generally prevail against war, the Russian invasion of Ukraine proved that war remains a viable instrument of foreign policy. Finally, this relatively novel approach bridges the gap between academia and policy.² As noted above, scenarios can contribute to the conduct of war games in the military establishment. It can be understood as a division of labor among practitioners and academics, where analysts with the knowledge of broad trends in international security establish the realistic boundaries of imagination while practitioners, who have the resources and the necessary tools, engage in preparations for the unimaginable. Already, scholars are incorporating scenario-based research and wargames as useful tools of analysis.³

² Eyal Hanfling, "Reviving war-game scholarship at MIT," *MIT News*, March 21, 2022.

³ Aaron Hale, "Game on," *UGA Today*, April 22, 2013; Sebastian J. Bae, "Establishing a Wargaming Insurgency at the University," *The Forge*, Accessed: June 11, 2022.

Introduction to the U.S.-China Security Dynamics and Scenarios

This introduction defines “scenarios” as narrative approximations of potential future conflicts. It is a “narrative approximation” meaning that the hypothetical interactive developments involving two or more actors are based on close representations of reality. Next, the term “potential future conflicts” indicates that the scenarios are speculative even though they are based on relative power trajectories, stated aims, available resources, and broad historical patterns. Moreover, speculation and prediction have different objectives. Speculation is an intellectual activity that aims to imagine multiple causal pathways while prediction is an “assertion of likelihood that an outcome will take place.”⁴ This report does not predict any given outcome as predictions are static and deterministic.⁵ In sum, a scenario, like those in this report, is an illustration of a likely pathway to conflict and of the dynamics of war aimed at drawing out policy implications through imaginative processes of multiple alternatives. Consider the short scenario below:

A Chinese submarine has collided with an Indian navy vessel off the Indian Coast. India claims that the collision occurred in Indian territorial waters and that it was not aware of the Chinese submarine’s presence so close to the Indian coast. The Chinese Ministry of Defense criticized India for its belligerence and aggressive actions as the Chinese sub was emerging from the waters to identify itself. The submarine was headed towards Djibouti after making secret visits in the region. When the Indian Coast Guard identified the submarine it alerted the Indian Navy, which spotted and hailed the Chinese sub and

⁴ Charles F. Doran, “Why Forecasts Fail: The Limits and Potential of Forecasting in International Relations and Economics,” *International Studies Review* 1, no. 2 (Summer 1999), 12.

⁵ Kang Su-Jeong, “Analysis of Scenarios on the Future of U.S.-China Relations: Focusing on the U.S. Think Tanks’ Foresight Reports in the 2010s,” *Journal of Asia-Pacific Studies* 27, no. 2 (2020), 7.

*forced it to emerge. During this hailing process an Indian naval vessel and the Chinese sub collided causing damage to both. There are no casualties on either side, however both vessels were badly damaged in the incident. Pakistan has offered to tow the damaged Chinese sub to its port in Gwadar. The Indian Ministry of Defence has accused the Chinese of collecting intelligence on Indian naval facilities in the Western Indian Ocean.*⁶

In the above scenario, the two main actors are China and India. The stage is set for conflict where an Indian naval vessel collided with a Chinese submarine. However, the situation contains multiple ambiguities, such as dispute over where and why the collision occurred. First, India is asserting that the collision occurred within their 12 nautical mile (nm) territorial waters while China is arguing that the collision occurred in the high seas. The issue of where is of significance because the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS) attributes different judiciary authority given the location of conflict. Second, India and China are providing different interpretations as to the causes of conflict. India blames the Chinese for secretly collecting intelligence near the Indian coasts while China accuses India for “belligerence and aggressive behavior.” As such, the hypothetical scenario invites critical thinking of a situation in which China and India may (or may not) go to war over the particular issue. More importantly, the scenario is based on realistic approximations of reality in which China manages a port in Djibouti and where a possibility exists that an inadvertent collision occurs while a Chinese vessel transits the Indian waterways. The hypothetical situation enables Chinese and Indian practitioners and decision makers to prepare for a similar event in the future. The same applies for concerned states such as Pakistan who seemingly will offer direct assistance to either country, whose actions will likely instigate resistance from either side.

⁶ This scenario is an excerpt from an exercise conducted during a maritime security track session at the 22-1 Comprehensive Security Course (CSC) at the Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies. I thank professor Wade Turvold and Srinii Sitaraman for their permission to reprint the scenario.

The scenarios in this policy report explicitly focuses on possible conflicts at sea near the Chinese coasts because as Caverley and Dombrowski rightly point out, “the most likely location for great-power friction is at sea.”⁷ Applying the distinction of continental to maritime powers as described in international relations scholarship, China is a continental power while the United States is a maritime power.⁸ While the United States has forward-deployed bases, forces, and its navy present in global waters; China has concentrated on building anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities close to shore.⁹ Of course, the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has recently been modernizing its force by introducing its first aircraft carrier in 2012 and upgrading its surface and underwater forces that enable China to project power beyond its near-seas. However, it is unclear whether China will be able to escape the ‘continental trap’ which all land powers have faced throughout history. France, a continental power that faced continual insecurities to its land borders, first came up with the commerce-raiding strategy in order to counter the superior British Royal Navy, and Germany, another continental power, implemented the commerce-raiding strategy through submarines during WWII against Britain.¹⁰ Similarly, it is difficult for China to directly compete with the United States that can invest the bulk of its resources in maritime capabilities. China borders fourteen states and has enduring conflicts with India and domestic insecurities in Xinjiang and Tibet. If China had learned from the failures of Tirpitz’s “risk fleet,” the optimal strategy for China is to enhance its A2/AD capabilities in the near-seas. This is one of the reasons why we

⁷ Jonathan D. Caverley and Peter Dombrowski, “Cruising for a Bruising: Maritime Competition in an Anti-Access Age,” *Security Studies* 29, no. 4 (2020), 673.

⁸ Robert S. Ross, “China’s Naval Nationalism: Sources, Prospects, and the U.S. Response,” *International Security* 34, no. 2 (Fall 2009), 46-81; Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, “Balancing on Land and at Sea,” *International Security* 35, no. 1 (Summer 2010), 7-43.

⁹ Stephen Biddle and Ivan Oelrich, “Future Warfare in the Western Pacific: Chinese Antiaccess/Area Denial, U.S. AirSea Battle, and Command of the Commons in East Asia,” *International Security* 41, no. 1 (Summer 2016), 7-48.

¹⁰ Martin N. Murphy and Toshi Yoshihara, “Fighting the Naval Hegemon: Evolution in French, Soviet, and Chinese Naval Thought,” *Naval War College Review* 68, no. 3 (Summer 2015), 12-39.

expect a conflict, if it ever happens between China and the U.S., will take place in either of the four maritime domains close to Chinese shores.

Another reason derives from the areas of conflict-of-interest between the U.S. and China. In the South China Sea, the United States strongly criticized China's artificial island construction in the South China Seas, the implicit nine-dash-line, and other assertive behaviors at sea. Although the United States has not ratified the UNCLOS, it maintains that these actions are "unlawful" in the face of international maritime rules and norms of free and open access to the global commons.¹¹ As a global hegemon, the United States has the responsibility to maintain the high seas free and open, and even if such egalitarian motives as mere rhetoric, the U.S. has significant national interests in protecting the sea lines of communication and in protecting the treaty allies and partners from adversarial coercion. That is why the United States is regularly conducting freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea and in the Taiwan Strait. It is questionable whether China considers the South China Sea its "core interests" and whether the U.S. will risk a direct military clash with China over minor skirmishes in the South China Sea, but inadvertent escalation remains a possibility. In the East China Sea, Japan and China have a territorial dispute over the Senkaku (Diaoyu Dao) Islands and as a treaty ally of Japan, there is a high possibility that the U.S. will intervene. The West Sea has been given less attention, partly due to a smaller U.S. Navy presence in the region and the absence of major territorial disputes. However, scenarios indicate that the West Sea may serve as another inflection point between China and the United States through inter-Korean conflict. First, another naval battle between the two Koreas can invite intervention from both the U.S. and China. In 2010, when North Korea sank the *Cheonan* and shelled the *Yeonpyeong* Island, the U.S. called for South Korean restraint,

¹¹ Department of State, *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision*, (Washington, D.C.: Department of State, November 2019), 23.

inviting skepticism in South Korea over U.S. resolve.¹² With the new U.S. military base in Pyeongtaek in close proximity to the Northern Limit Line (NLL) and the declining patience over North Korean missile and nuclear capabilities, the U.S. may respond with unprecedented force to show commitment to the U.S.-ROK alliance, perhaps to rebut the doubts sown about the U.S. alliance with the ROK in the 2010 incidents. In the case of massive U.S. presence and the use of force in the West Sea, which is especially close to Beijing, there is a high chance that China will respond with its own measures, irrespective of its commitment to North Korea. Altogether, this indicates that both China and the United States have significant national interests at stake in the four maritime domains and the likelihood of a clash at sea is high in the respective regions.

Finally, the potential conflict between China and the United States has immense implications for the U.S.-led liberal international order and for the neighboring states. First, the liberal international order is loosely defined as a set of rules, norms, and institutions that reflect liberal values and regulate interactions among states.¹³ An international order can also be separated into sub-orders, depending on the issue areas or the region.¹⁴ For instance, the U.S.-led Bretton Woods system stabilized the economic relations among states into rules and principles that reflected the economic interests and visions of the West. The provision of developmental aid by the World Bank (WB) often carried political and societal conditions such as labor rights and environmental regulations.¹⁵ Financial loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) frequently required domestic reforms

¹² Ian Bowers and Henrik Stålhane Hiim, "Conventional Counterforce Dilemmas: South Korea's Deterrence Strategy and Stability on the Korean Peninsula," *International Security* 45, no. 3 (Winter 2020/21), p. 14.

¹³ Michael Mazarr, *Understanding the Current International Order* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2016), 7.

¹⁴ David A. Lake, Lisa L. Martin, and Thomas Risse, "Challenges to the Liberal Order: Reflections on International Organization," *International Organization* 75, no. 2 (2021), 3.

¹⁵ Robert Hunter Wade, "US Hegemony and the World Bank: the fight over people and ideas," *Review of International Political Economy* 9, no. 2 (Summer 2002), 205.

such as flexible exchange rates.¹⁶ In this sense, the WB and the IMF can be viewed as explicit mechanisms that promote the economic visions of the West. However, not all mechanisms are formal and explicit. For example, the non-proliferation regime does not have a tangible organization, but nevertheless constrains state behavior through the shared understandings of nuclear weapons proliferation. In addition, the security order can be divided along regional lines—the United States constructed a formal multilateral organization (North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)) in Europe while simultaneously constructing a hub-and-spokes alliance system in East Asia. During the Cold War, the world was bipolar, meaning that there were two great powers, each having their own sphere of influence with specific sets of rules, norms, and institutions.

When the Soviet Union collapsed and when the international system transitioned into a U.S.-led liberal international order became the sole alternative order, Russia, at least on the surface, adopted the democratic presidential system, and China became deeply integrated into the Bretton Woods system by joining numerous international economic organizations such as APEC, EAS, WTO, IMF, and the WB—despite some reservations. However, with the rapid rise of China in the 2000s, debate arose about the future of U.S.-China relations, and more broadly, about the future of the liberal international order.¹⁷ Today, with the rise of illiberal regimes across continents, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the world is seemingly becoming more polarized into liberal and authoritarian spheres. If a conflict between the United States and China is to ever occur in any of the four maritime domains, it will mark the return of a “new Cold War” and the certain decline of the liberal international order

¹⁶ Axel Dreher and Nathan J. Jensen, “Independent Actor or Agent? An Empirical Analysis of the Impact of U.S. Interests on International Monetary Fund Conditions,” *The Journal of Law & Economics* 50, no. 1 (February 2007), 105-124.

¹⁷ Aaron L. Friedberg, “The Future of U.S.-China Relations: Is Conflict Inevitable?” *International Security* 30, no. 2 (Fall 2005), 7-45.

that had enjoyed the prospect of the universality of liberal internationalism.

Subsequently, regional states, especially those countries that avoided picking sides on territorial issues would feel increased pressure to choose between the U.S. and China. Treaty allies of the United States such as Japan and Australia have already shown clear preferences by committing to U.S.-led initiatives. South Korea, on the other hand, retains its position of “strategic ambiguity.” Although the degree of ambiguity is more or less strengthened or weakened depending on the administration, it seems that the dilemma is hard to overcome due to the North Korean factor. Economic interdependence with China can hypothetically be complemented by alternative markets and trade partners, but North Korea is a perennial threat to the national security of South Korea. As long as China and the United States are both indispensable actors determining the fate of the Korean peninsula, the strategic dilemma will persist. Consequently, what the crisis of the liberal international order and the prospect of conflict between China and the United States means for regional states is that they must prepare in advance for undesirable situations. Therefore, the conflict scenarios not only have practical implications for the navies and the militaries to prepare for various contingencies, but also for the nation-states as a whole, to start thinking about the strategic choices that they will have to make, which will represent the desired future of the nation.

02

Conflict Scenarios between the United States and China in the South China Sea

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Conflict Scenarios between the United States and China in the South China Sea¹

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Introduction

Dr. Jung Pak, U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State said, “in recent years, the PRC has stepped up its coercive activities in the South China Sea by increasing its deployment of maritime militias that operate alongside PRC law enforcement and military to harass and intimidate other claimant states.”² She added that “these PRC actions represent a systemic and calculated effort to interfere with the rights and freedoms, including the navigational rights and freedoms, that all countries enjoy under international law.”³ What are China’s goals in the South China Sea? What measures has the U.S. military employed to counter challenges posed by China? What potential conflict scenarios might arise between China and the United States regarding the South China Sea? What are the implications for other actions in the Asia-Pacific

¹ I would like to thank my undergraduate research assistants, Kevin Lightner and Yara Hussein, for their excellent research assistance.

² U.S. Department of State report on China’s Maritime Claims in the South China Sea. <https://www.state.gov/limits-in-the-seas/>

³ Ibid.

region, specifically, the Republic of Korea Navy?

In this report, I first specify the particular goals of China in the South China Sea and the measures China utilizes to reach those goals. The next section analyzes military countermeasures from the United States, such as freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) and multilateral exercises involving the UK and Australia. The following section discusses potential conflict scenarios between China and the United States. The report concludes with implications and recommendations for other actors in the region, including the Republic of Korea Navy.

China's Goals in the South China Sea

China's claims in the South China Sea include sovereignty and maritime rights. According to the position paper published by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs:

“China's Nansha Zhudao (the South China Sea Islands) consist of Dongsha Qundao (the Dongsha Islands), Xisha Qundao (the Xisha Islands), Zhongsha Qundao (the Zhongsha Islands), and Nansha Qundao (the Nansha Islands). The activities of the Chinese people in the South China Sea date back to over 2,000 years ago. China is the first to have discovered, named, and explored and exploited Nansha Zhudao and relevant waters, and the first to have exercised sovereignty and jurisdiction over them continuously, peacefully and effectively, thus establishing territorial sovereignty and relevant rights and interests in the South China Sea...”⁴

China argues that it has territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests in the South China Sea, including 1) sovereignty over Nansha Zhudao; 2) internal waters, territorial sea and contiguous zone, based on Nansha Zhudao; 3) exclusive economic zone and continental shelf, based on Nansha Zhudao; and 4) historic rights in the South China Sea.⁵

The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs makes it clear that “China is always firmly opposed to the invasion and illegal occupation by certain states of some islands and reefs of China's Nansha Qundao, and activities infringing upon China's rights

⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Statement of the Government of the People's Republic of China on China's Territorial Sovereignty and Maritime Rights and Interests in the South China Sea,” July 12, 2016, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/nanshai/eng/snhwtlcwj_1/201607/t20160712_8527297.htm.

⁵ Ibid.

and interests in relevant maritime areas under China's jurisdiction."⁶ Meanwhile, China "stands ready to continue to resolve the relevant disputes peacefully through negotiation and consultation with the states directly concerned on the basis of respecting historical facts and in accordance with international law."⁷

As such, China takes a "carrots and sticks" approach toward issues in the South China Sea, at times using coercion while engaging in negotiations and talks with other disputants. The "sticks" that China uses involve coercion and land reclamation.

On the one hand, China has been using coercion in the past several decades and, in more recent years, has focused on the use of non-militarized coercive tools, including diplomatic sanctions, economic sanctions, and gray-zone coercion.⁸ Based on the author's previous research utilizing Chinese government documents and interviews with Chinese officials and analysts, China's direct goal of coercion is to stop other South China Sea claimants from controlling currently unoccupied land features in the South China Sea.⁹ Further, China also used coercion to pressure these claimants to bilateral talks instead of using international law or multilateral platforms.¹⁰ The broader goal of China's coercion is to stop other states from viewing China as weak and engaging in actions that threatened Chinese interests in the South China Sea in the future.¹¹

On the other hand, China has also conducted a large-scale land reclamation in the South China Sea, especially in the 2014-2015 period. Based on the author's

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ See Ketian Zhang, "Cautious Bully: Reputation, Resolve, and Beijing's Use of Coercion in the South China Sea," *International Security*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Summer 2019), pp. 117-159.

⁹ Ibid., p. 147.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

research involving primary Chinese-language documents from the local Hainan provincial government and interviews with former Chinese civilian and military officials, the goal of China's land reclamation was three-fold: military, administrative, and economic, with the aim being to provide military and civilian logistical support (*wei junshi xingzheng jingji deng tigong zonghe fuwubaozhang*).¹² Chinese Hainan provincial government documents show that economically, land reclamation logistically facilitates China's oil exploration in the South China Sea as well as the fishing industry: reclaimed Islands can serve as transport, refueling, and ship repair stops for China's deep-sea fishing fleet.¹³ The emphasis, therefore, was on basic infrastructure for China's civilians and military. Chinese government policy analysts also indicated that land reclamation was related to China's economic development: maritime fishery calls for land reclamation.¹⁴ After all, Chinese fishers previously had to go to features controlled by the Philippines and Vietnam in order to avoid windy weather.

In addition to using coercion and land reclamation, China also utilizes negotiations and talks as confidence building measures in the South China Sea. Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi had a phone conversation with Vietnamese Foreign Minister Bui Thanh Son" on April 14, 2021, in which an "agreement on a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC)" was discussed."¹⁵ Nevertheless, at present, there is still no agreed code of conduct regarding the South China Sea between China and ASEAN. Amidst the growing U.S.- China rivalry and the COVID-19 pandemic, progress on negotiations has experienced significant

¹² Qtd. in Ketian Zhang, "Explaining China's large-scale land reclamation in the South China Sea: Timing and rationale," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Feb 2022, <https://www-tandfonline-com.mutex.gmu.edu/doi/full/10.1080/01402390.2022.2040486>, p. 13.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 14.

¹⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Peoples' Republic of China, Wang Yi Speaks with Vietnamese Foreign Minister Bui Thanh Son on the Phone, April 14, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202204/t20220415_10668407.html

delays. Negotiations were set to have a productive outcome by the end of 2022, but it remains unclear if this deadline can be reached.¹⁶ As of January 2022, Wang Yi made an official statement that China will not “bully” its smaller neighbors and disputes within the South China Sea must be handled peacefully.¹⁷ However, despite wanting a diplomatic channel to resolve disputes, China still utilizes coercion.

Before examining the potential conflict scenarios, it is necessary to discuss what China considers its “core interest,” which dictates what scenarios are more plausible. China considers Taiwan and Tibet as core interests, whereas individual territorial disputes such as those in the South China Sea - which concern sovereignty and territorial integrity - are important national security concerns but not core interests. The first official reference to Taiwan as one of China’s core interests appeared in the report of a meeting between Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan and Secretary of State Colin Powell on January 19, 2003.¹⁸ In a previously internal speech made by President Hu Jintao on the international situation and foreign affairs during the Central Foreign Affairs Conference (*zhongyang waishi huiyi*) in August 2006, Hu also reaffirmed Taiwan as one of China’s core interests.¹⁹ As President Hu Jintao stated during the internal Central Foreign Affairs Conference in August 2006, it is necessary to differentiate between core and important interests. Core interests should be defended with resolution and without compromise, whereas important interests leave room for maneuver, and [China] should strive to get the best results.²⁰ Even when

¹⁶ “Is Beijing Rushing Conclusion of South China Sea Code to Keep Us at Bay?” *South China Morning Post*, December 27, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3161176/south-china-sea-code-conduct-may-miss-2022-deadline-pla>.

¹⁷ Neil Jerome Morales, “China Won’t ‘Bully’ Neighbors over South China Sea, Foreign Minister Says,” *Reuters*, January 17, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-wont-bully-neighbours-over-s-china-sea-foreign-minister-says-2022-01-17/>.

¹⁸ *People’s Daily*, January 21, 2003.

¹⁹ Hu Jintao, *Hu Jintao wenxuan [Hu Jintao’s Selected Works]* (Beijing: People’s Press, 2016), p. 510. Hu’s speech during this conference was previously not made public.

²⁰ Hu Jintao, *Hu Jintao’s Selected Works*, p. 519. See also Hu Jintao, *Hu Jintao wenxuan disan juan [Hu Jintao’s Selected Works Vol. 3]* (Beijing: People’s Press, 2016), p. 237.

South China Sea issues became increasingly salient in 2009, senior Chinese officials never once listed the South China Sea as a “core interest.” For example, during a private luncheon at the Sino-U.S. Strategic and Economic Dialogue on July 29, 2009, Chinese State Councilor Dai Bingguo made the Chinese stance to U.S. officials clear: “The South China Sea is highly sensitive (*gaodu ming’an*); we hope that the United States will respect China’s interests and concerns (*liyi he guanqie*) regarding the South China Sea.”²¹ Bader also confirmed that the Chinese deputy Foreign Minister gave a presentation on China’s rights in the South China Sea in March 2010, highlighting it as a national priority but never calling it a “core interest,” like Taiwan or Tibet.²² Therefore, Taiwan is an issue that China is most likely to go to war for, whereas South China Sea disputes are important but not core interests.

²¹ Dai Bingguo, *Zhanlue duihua: dai bingguo huiyilu [Strategic Dialogues: Dai Bingguo’s Memoir]* (Beijing: People’s Press, 2016), p. 157.

²² Jeffrey A. Bader, *Obama and China’s Rise*, p. 77.

U.S. Military Countermeasures

In response to excessive maritime claims by claimants in South China Sea disputes, including China's, the United States has frequently conducted Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) to uphold international law and protect the right of innocent passage. The Department of Defense does not release the exact amount of FONOPs conducted in a given year but provides a rough estimate every year through a report to Congress.²³

In 2020, the Department of Defense stated in a report to Congress that it conducted seven operations to challenge excessive maritime claims made by the PRC. Three FONOPs were conducted in the South China Sea, one in the East China Sea, and three in both the South and East China Seas. These operations were conducted to challenge various assertions by the PRC, including claiming jurisdiction over all surveying and mapping activities in the region, criminalizing surveying and mapping activities conducted without PRC approval, and requiring prior registration for foreign military vessels looking for innocent passage.²⁴

In January 2020, the U.S. navy conducted a FONOP in the South China Sea by sending the littoral combat ship *Montgomery* to challenge China's claims in the region. The mission targeted the Spratly Island region and challenged the claim that innocent passage requires prior registration. China responded by sending two People's Liberation Army (PLA) fighters in a show of force.²⁵

²³ Geoff Ziezulewicz, "Freedom of Navigation Operations Rose in 2021, but Fewer were Near China," *Navy Times*, 2022. <https://www.navytimes.com/news/your-navy/2022/04/04/china-takes-center-stage-in-fy21-freedom-of-navigation-operations-report/>.

²⁴ Department of Defense, *Report to Congress: Annual Freedom of Navigation Report Fiscal Year 2020*, 2021, <https://policy.defense.gov/Portals/11/Documents/FY20%20DoD%20FON%20Report%20FINAL.pdf>.

²⁵ David B. Larter, "In Challenging China's Claims in the South China Sea, the US Navy is Getting More Assertive," *Defense News*, 2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2020/02/05/in-challenging-chinas-claims-in-the-south>.

Later that year, in April, the U.S. Navy conducted another FONOP in the South China Sea, targeting the Paracel Islands. The United States was disputing a claim by China stating that the water between the islands qualifies as territorial waters instead of international waters. The ship involved in this operation, U.S.S. *Barry*, also joined an operation off the coast of Malaysia to address a mineral exploration dispute between Malaysia and China.²⁶

In late 2020, the United States and Japan conducted operation “Keen Sword.” The U.S. Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps were involved in these operations. The exercise included “maritime operations, amphibious landings, air operations, resupply efforts, integrated air and missile defense exercises, cyber and space operations, and base security events.” These operations were conducted throughout mainland Japan and its surrounding waters. 9,000 U.S. personnel and 37,000 Japanese personnel participated in the exercises designed to enhance strategic cooperation between Japan and the United States.²⁷

In 2021, the number of FONOPs targeting China decreased. While seven were conducted in 2020, the Department of Defense stated that it conducted five FONOPs challenging Chinese maritime claims. Four challenged claims in the South China Sea, while one challenged a claim in the East China sea. Claims challenged by these operations were similar to those made in 2020.²⁸

In July 2021, the U.S. Navy conducted another FONOP targeting the Paracel

china-sea-the-us-navy-is-getting-more-assertive/.

²⁶ Sam LaGrone, “China Says PLA Scrambled Aircraft, Ships to ‘Expel’ US Warship from South China Sea Island Chain - USNI News,” *USNI News*, 2020, <https://news.usni.org/2020/04/28/china-says-pla-scrambled-aircraft-ships-to-expel-u-s-warship-from-south-china-sea-island-chain>.

²⁷ U.S. Navy Office of Information, “Keen Sword 21 Enhances US-Japan Alliance,” 2020, <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/News-Stories/Article/2408070/keen-sword-21-enhances-us-japan-alliance/>.

²⁸ Department of Defense, *Report to Congress: Annual Freedom of Navigation Report Fiscal Year 2021, 2022*, https://policy.defense.gov/Portals/11/Documents/FON%20Program%20Report_FY2021.pdf.

Islands.²⁹ The PLA would later assert that Washington's operation was violating its sovereignty and that it managed to "drive away" the USS *Benfold*. The U.S. Navy denies this claim, stating that the continuation of the operation was not deterred.³⁰

In September 2021, the USS *Benfold* of the 7th Fleet conducted a FONOP in the South China Sea, challenging China's assertion that Mischief Reef falls under territorial waters under international law. The U.S. Navy stated, "features like Mischief Reef that are submerged at high tide in their naturally formed state are not entitled to a territorial sea."³¹

Interestingly, 2021 also witnessed multilateral activities involving the United States and its close allies and partners. For example, the United States conducted naval operations with its close ally, the United Kingdom. That summer, U.S. naval vessels accompanied the United Kingdom in forming Carrier Strike Group 21 to aid the UK in its "most ambitious global deployment for over two decades." The strike group was intended to be a global show of force and sailed through the Mediterranean, Middle East, and Indo-Pacific regions. The group did not conduct a FONOP in the South China Sea, though it sailed through it to project power.³²

In October 2021, the U.S. and Japanese navies conducted bilateral operations in the South China Sea. These operations included "flight operations, coordinated tactical training between surface and air units, refueling-at-sea evolutions, and maritime strike exercises." Exercises like this were described by a Japanese officer as

²⁹ U.S. Navy Office of Information, "7th Fleet Conducts Freedom of Navigation Operation," 2021, <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/News-Stories/Article/2690226/7th-fleet-conducts-freedom-of-navigation-operation/>.

³⁰ Mallory Shelbourne, "Navy Denies Chinese Forces Chased Away Destroyer During FONOP," USNI News, 2021, <https://news.usni.org/2021/07/12/navy-denies-chinese-forces-chased-away-destroyer-during-fohop>.

³¹ U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Public Affairs, "7th Fleet Conducts Freedom of Navigation Operation," U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2768060/7th-fleet-conducts-freedom-of-navigation-operation/>.

³² Lalit Kapur, "Britain's Return to the Indo-Pacific," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 2021, <https://amti.csis.org/britains-return-to-the-indo-pacific/>.

being “vital to maritime security and underpin the free flow of commerce and access to resources in the region.”³³ In November, a destroyer from the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force and littoral combat ship USS Jackson conducted a bilateral operation in the South China Sea to enhance interoperability between the forces of the two countries.³⁴

In short, the United States conducted FONOPs unilaterally while engaging in multilateral or bilateral activities with allies and partners in the region to counter challenges from China.

³³ U.S. Navy Office of Information, “JMSDF, U.S. -Navy Conduct Bilateral Operations in South China Sea,” 2021, <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/News-Stories/Article/2820900/jmsdf-us-navy-conduct-bilateral-operations-in-south-china-sea/>.

³⁴ Lauren Chatmas, “U.S. Navy, JMSDF Ships Pair for Exercise in South China Sea,” U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, 2021, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2829200/us-navy-jmsdf-ships-pair-for-exercise-in-south-china-sea/>.

Conflict Scenarios

There are three potential conflict scenarios involving China and the United States: one involving China and the United States directly, one due to China's conflicts with U.S. allies in the region, and one arising because of Taiwan. It is important to note that the scenarios that are explored here are akin to pathways to conflicts. They might not be as specific as a campaign analysis or wargaming style scenario, but the scenarios laid out below are more plausible than other scenarios based on empirical evidence analyzed in this chapter. Future research could expand the below scenarios into detailed ones for wargaming purposes.

Scenario One

The first one could involve actions by the Chinese U.S. militaries, for example, the use of drones or FONOPs in the South China Sea. In December 2016, China seized a U.S. Navy drone conducting reconnaissance missions in the South China Sea. China did return the drone in less than a week. According to political scientist Erik Lin-Greenberg, Washington has generally avoided retaliating when its drones are attacked, choosing not to escalate.³⁵ Nevertheless, it is possible that in the future, the seizure of U.S. drones could lead to miscalculations and unintended escalations at the local level in the South China Sea, although it is relatively unlikely that China and the United States would willingly go into conflicts over unmanned assets.

Similarly, as of now, China and the United States have a code of conduct

³⁵ Erik Lin-Greenberg, "So China seized a U.S. drone submarine? Welcome to the future of international conflict," *Washington Post Monkey Cage*, December 23, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/12/23/so-china-seized-a-u-s-drone-submarine-welcome-to-the-future-of-international-conflict/>.

regarding unintended encounters at sea, but a future scenario could arise in which a U.S. naval ship conducting FONOPs unintentionally bumped into a Chinese naval vessel, which then could escalate into conflicts. These scenarios in this first category, however, are unlikely to escalate into major conflicts between the two countries because neither of them would have the intention to. It is quite likely that negotiations will resume after a brief skirmish.

Scenario Two

The second scenario might start over an incident between China and a U.S. partner or treaty ally in the region. The following passages first describe the potential incidents and then introduce the scenario. Unfazed by growing global concern and criticism, China's actions in the South China Sea include fishing incidents, disputes over energy exploration, and activities by the Chinese Coast Guard (CGC) ships.

FISHING INCIDENTS. The South China Sea is reported to have accounted for “12 percent of global fish catch in 2015.”³⁶ Although China lays claim to a majority of the waters, surrounding countries maintain competing claims of their respective Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) as stipulated by international law. The resulting competition over access to fishing resources in the South China Sea is tense, and these tensions are often stoked by constant confrontations revolving around fishing operations.

For example, in April 2020, Chinese Coast Guard vessel (*Hanjing 4301*) rammed into a Vietnamese fishing boat (*QNG 90617 TS*) off the coast of the Paracel Islands,

³⁶ Gregory B Poling, “Illuminating the South China Sea’s Dark Fishing Fleets,” Stephenson Ocean Security Project (Center for Strategic & International Studies, January 9, 2019), <https://ocean.csis.org/spotlights/illuminating-the-south-china-seas-dark-fishing-fleets/>

sinking the boat and detaining the whole crew.³⁷ Two other Vietnamese fishing vessels attempted to rescue the fishermen but were also seized.³⁸ The crews were released after signing documents in Chinese confessing to illegal fishing.³⁹ Vietnam filed an official protest of the incident, with its Foreign Ministry releasing a statement claiming the actions of the Chinese vessel “violated Vietnam’s sovereignty over the Hoang Sa archipelago (Paracel Islands) and threatened lives and damaged the property of Vietnamese fishermen.”⁴⁰ The Chinese response differed on the other hand, blaming the incident on the Vietnamese fisherman, claiming they entered the waters illegally to fish and refused to leave.⁴¹ The Paracel Islands remain a disputed area between China and Vietnam; the islands fall within China’s nine dash line and presently remain under control by China, but also lie within the overlapping EEZs of both Vietnam and China.

In May 2021, the Philippines directly opposed China’s annual moratorium on fishing in the South China Sea, stating that it does not apply to Filipino fishermen and encouraging them to fish in what Manila recognizes as the West Philippine Sea.⁴² Since 1999, China has enacted a fishing moratorium from May 1 to August 16 in order to preserve marine fisheries.⁴³ Both the Philippines and Vietnam directly oppose this

³⁷ “South China Sea Incidents: 2020,” South China Sea Incident Tracker (Center for Strategic & International Studies iLab, 2020), <https://csis-ilab.github.io/cpower-viz/csis-china-sea/>.

³⁸ dpa, “Chinese Ship, Vietnamese Fishing Boat Collide in South China Sea,” South China Morning Post (South China Morning Post Publishers Ltd., April 4, 2020), <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3078286/chinese-ship-hits-and-sinks-vietnamese-fishing-boat-south>.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ “South China Sea Incidents: 2020,” South China Sea Incident Tracker (Center for Strategic & International Studies iLab, 2020), <https://csis-ilab.github.io/cpower-viz/csis-china-sea/>.

⁴¹ Khanh Vu, “Vietnam Protests Beijing’s Sinking of South China Sea Boat,” Reuters (Thomson Reuters, April 4, 2020), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-vietnam-china-southchinasea/vietnam-protests-beijings-sinking-of-south-china-sea-boat-idUSKBN21M072>.

⁴² Karen Lema, “Philippines Tells Fishermen to Ignore Beijing’s Ban on Fishing in South China Sea,” Reuters (Thomson Reuters, May 5, 2021), <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/philippines-tells-fishermen-ignore-beijings-ban-fishing-south-china-sea-2021-05-05/>.

⁴³ HuaXia, “China Focus: Annual Summer Sea Fishing Ban Starts,” Xinhua (XINHUANET, May 1, 2021), http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-05/01/c_139919781.htm.

fishing ban and encourage fishermen to keep pursuing fishing operations in their EEZs.

ENERGY EXPLORATION. Energy security is a growing concern to all involved parties, especially as tensions in the South China Sea continue to rise. All surrounding countries currently pursue energy exploration in the South China Sea with designated blocks.⁴⁴ For example, in May 2020, a nearly six-month long standoff between Malaysia, China, and Vietnam over a Malaysian oil drillship ended.⁴⁵ Whilst operating in the Lala-1 block, Malaysian drillship appeared to be surveilled by Chinese survey ship Haiyaing Dizhi 8, which also proceeded to be tailed by Vietnamese ships when it passed through Vietnam's EEZ. Tensions further escalated when U.S. warships also began patrolling the area. The standoff started in December 2019 and was officially considered over when Malaysian drillship West Capella finally exited the area.⁴⁶ Beijing often demands that countries halt oil and gas explorations when countries deny it leads to standoffs like this. A similar standoff occurred one year prior between China and Vietnam after Vietnam refused to halt oil and gas exploration in the disputed area.⁴⁷

CHINESE COAST GUARD ACTIVITIES. In recent years, the Chinese Coast Guard ships have become even more active. For example, in February 2020, a Philippine Navy anti-submarine vessel (*Conrado Yap*) and People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) vessel engaged in a standoff, where the PLAN vessel allegedly aimed its guns at the *Conrado Yap*.⁴⁸ This occurred while the *Conrado Yap* was conducting

⁴⁴ "South China Sea Energy Exploration and Development," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, accessed April 19, 2022, <https://amti.csis.org/south-china-sea-energy-exploration-and-development/>.

⁴⁵ Ivy Kwek et al., "Malaysia's Rationale and Response to South China Sea Tensions," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, May 29, 2020, <https://amti.csis.org/malaysias-rationale-and-response-to-south-china-sea-tensions/>.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Renato Cruz de Castro, "Implications of the Recent Philippines-China Naval Stand-Off," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (Center for Strategic & International Studies Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, May 7, 2020), <https://amti.csis.org/philippines-china-naval-stand-off/>.

maritime sovereignty patrols. When issuing a warning to the PLAN vessel, the PLAN vessel stated that China has control over the South China Sea and its “adjacent waters.”⁴⁹

In March 2021, more than 200 Chinese fishing vessels remained stationed at Whitsun reef in the Spratly Islands, within the Philippines’ claimed EEZ, for weeks.⁵⁰ China claimed that these 200 vessels moored at the reef were simply fishermen taking shelter from bad weather, but counterclaims state that these boats were crewed by maritime militia.⁵¹ No direct confrontation occurred.

As such, the second scenario might arise out of the three aforementioned incidents. The United States might be involved militarily, especially if the incident concerns a U.S. treaty ally in the South China Sea. For example, China and the Philippines, a U.S. treaty ally, have maritime territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Although China tends to prefer non-militarized instead of militarized coercive tools when coercing the Philippines, for fear of getting the United States militarily involved, it is possible in the future that the Chinese navy might intentionally or unintentionally ram Filipino naval vessels or the Chinese navy might force the Philippines off of a land feature it already occupies in the South China Sea, or the Chinese navy might inflict harm on Filipino civilians fishing or conducting energy exploration in the disputed waters.

As a result, the United States could offer military assistance to the Philippines through the U.S. navy or air force. In a scenario like this, the Chinese military can be highly vulnerable to targeting by U.S. aircraft because of the vicinity of U.S. bases in

[csis.org/implications-of-the-recent-philippines-china-naval-stand-off/](https://www.csis.org/implications-of-the-recent-philippines-china-naval-stand-off/).

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Mark J Valencia, “The Whitsun Reef Incident and the Law of the Sea,” Lawfare (Lawfare Institute in cooperation with the Brookings Institute, August 31, 2021), <https://www.lawfareblog.com/whitsun-reef-incident-and-law-sea>.

⁵¹ Ibid.

the Southeast Asian region. Moreover, even if the United States does not face off the Chinese navy directly, the Chinese navy will still face challenges from the Philippines. As political scientist Michael Beckley has carefully demonstrated, China is far from able to enforce its South China Sea claims, let alone dominate the region.⁵² According to Beckley, some Southeast Asian nations have capitalized on their geographic advantages by developing A2/AD capabilities.⁵³ Therefore, it is entirely plausible that, with the assistance from the United States in the Philippines' A2/AD capabilities, the Chinese navy and the Filipino counterpart might end up with a stalemate, which then calls for diplomatic instead of military solutions.

Scenario Three

The last scenario, and likely the most escalatory one, might involve Taiwan. As mentioned earlier, Taiwan is considered China's core interest, the one area China is most likely to be willing to go to war for. For example, if China invades Taiwan, the United States might react by trying to enforce a blockade of Chinese shipping in the entire South China Sea region to compel China to stop the invasion, given the importance of commercial and oil shipping routes in the South China Sea. The United States could enforce a South China Sea blockade in order to choke China's energy and commercial supply line, which may then compel China to stop its invasion of Taiwan. As political scientist Fiona Cunningham calculates through a detailed campaign analysis, an interception-style blockade by the United States in the Southeast Asian straits is feasible, but the campaign would place severe demands on U.S. naval forces

⁵² Michael Beckley, 'The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia: How China's Neighbors Can Check Chinese Naval Expansion,' *International Security* 42 (2), (2017), pp. 78-119.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

and require extensive support from other countries.⁵⁴

Nevertheless, just because the United States could win in such a blockade scenario does not necessarily mean political victory. After all, because the Chinese economy is so intricately connected with the United States and the rest of East Asian countries down to the supply chain level, such a blockade could be a devastating blow to the business communities in the United States, Japan, South Korea, as well as Southeast Asian countries. This is because a blockade, if successful, would interrupt the entire production and supply chain in the region, and it might be difficult for all countries to find alternative export or import sources in a timely manner. At the same time, it is possible for China to survive using its land-based energy supply lines. Therefore, such a scenario could be a net loss for all parties involved, so much so that it renders the military victory meaningless. As political scientists Jack Levy and William Thompson note, “it is the diplomatic and political outcomes of war that are important, and they are not always congruent with military outcomes on the battlefield.”⁵⁵

In short, it is relatively unlikely the United States and China will intentionally go into conflicts over territorial disputes in the South China Sea because both sides aim at avoiding escalation and also because the stakes regarding South China Sea land features are simply not as high as compared to Taiwan. However, it is plausible that China and the United States might engage in a blockade-counter blockade campaign in the South China Sea, in which the United States could prevail. Still, such a military victory does not mean political victory.

⁵⁴ Fiona S. Cunningham, “The Maritime Rung on the Escalation Ladder: Naval Blockades in a US-China Conflict,” *Security Studies*, Volume. 29, Issue 4 (2020), pp. 730-768.

⁵⁵ Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, *Causes of War* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 8.

Implications for other regional actors

So, what do all these mean for regional actors, especially the Republic of Korea Navy? First, all parties involved have an interest in ensuring stability in the South China Sea region because it is an important shipping lane for commercial shipping and energy transport. As such, the first implication is that China, the United States, Southeast Asian countries, and others in the region, such as Japan and Korea should spend efforts in confidence building measures including multilateral disaster relief and anti-piracy exercises in the South China Sea. These joint exercises tend to be low-sensitivity as they do not concern sovereignty issues in the South China Sea. Traditionally, China and ASEAN countries have organized such exercises, but it will be useful for outside actors such as Japan and Korea to get involved, given the common interest in maintaining stability in the SLOCs.

Second, all countries in the region, including East Asian ones such as Japan and Korea, can get together to negotiate a code of conduct for unintended encounters. Currently, the U.S. and Chinese navies have a code of conduct for unintended encounters in the South China Sea. Still, there has to be a multilateral code of conduct involving ASEAN as well as East Asian countries, which might further help reduce the potential for unintended escalations.

Third, although countries such as the UK and Australia have joined efforts with the United States to patrol the South China Sea, multilateral FONOPs might not be the best option because it could further generate a counteraction from China. As my past research has demonstrated, when the media salience of an event is high, China tends to view its own reputation of resolve on the line, which leads China to

use coercive measures to maintain its resolve in maritime disputes.⁵⁶ Multilateral FONOPs tend to be heavily reported by international media and therefore can be counter-productive in deterring China in the South China Sea. As discussed earlier, the Korean navy could contribute to regional peace and stability by getting involved in multilateral disaster relief and anti-piracy exercises.

Finally, because the U.S. military might need assistance in the blockade scenario discussed in the previous section, the Korean navy could be of help to the United States in this regard. Nevertheless, it is crucial to consider the political consequences - whether China will retaliate with coercive measures, such as sanctions, which it imposed when Korea allowed the United States to deploy THADD.

⁵⁶ Zhang, "Cautious Bully."

Conclusion

To conclude, I argue in this report that China's claims in the South China Sea include sovereignty and maritime rights. China takes a "carrots and sticks" approach toward issues in the South China Sea, at times using coercion but also engaging in negotiations and talks with other disputants. The "sticks" that China uses involve coercion and land reclamation. The broader goal of China's coercion is to stop other states from viewing China as weak and engaging in actions that threaten Chinese interests in the South China Sea in the future. The goal of China's land reclamation was three-fold: military, administrative, and economic, with the aim being to provide military and civilian logistical support.

In response to excessive maritime claims by claimants in South China Sea disputes, including China's, the United States has frequently conducted Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) to uphold international law and protect the right of innocent passage. Interestingly, 2021 also witnessed multilateral activities involving the United States and its close allies and partners.

As for conflict scenarios involving the United States and China, unintended escalations might arise because of China's potential seizing of a U.S. drone or ramming into FONOP ships in the future. China and the United States might also get militarily involved due to China's disputes with U.S. treaty allies in the region, such as the Philippines. A most escalatory scenario could be a U.S. naval blockade of Chinese shipping in Southeast Asian straits in response to China's invasion of Taiwan, in which the United States could prevail, especially with assistance from its allies.

Regarding implications for other actors, such as the Korean navy, it is beneficial to participate in multilateral disaster relief and anti-piracy exercises in the South China Sea and to help negotiate a multilateral code of conduct for unintended encounters to reduce escalation potential. The Korean navy could be of help to the United States in a U.S. naval blockade scenario in the South China Sea.

03

Structure and Contingency: War Onset in the East China Sea

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Structure and Contingency: War Onset in the East China Sea

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Introduction

What could trigger a conflict in the East China Sea between China on one side and Japan and the United States on the other, and what would that conflict look like? The conflict and its escalation both are analyzed here from the perspective of longer-term, structural trends and from contingent events characterized by friction and by chance. Our view of conflict then takes into account how conflicts can easily attain their own momentum and create a new status quo that actors adapt to, where the uncertainty of the fog of war exacerbates the risks and officials face international and especially domestic audience costs that push them to expand their wartime goals.¹

¹ These drivers of escalation are well described in the international relations literature; their joint occurrence further exacerbates the so-called security dilemma and paves the way to further escalation. On the fundamentals of crisis and crisis escalation see Lebow's updated classic, Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War: 40th Anniversary Revised Edition*, 1st ed. 2020 edition (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). The First World War is a prime example case of crisis escalation, but it bears noting that these dynamics are, albeit to varying degrees, present in the onset of virtually all system wars. For a systematic account of the steps that lead to general and system wars, see John A. Vasquez, *The War Puzzle Revisited*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

To evaluate how these factors for the East China Sea scenario, we first analyze the structural drivers of China, the United States, Japan, South Korea, and other regional states' maritime strategies, territorial disputes, and geographic constraints. With this, we also discuss the East China Sea's position as a central part of the First Island Chain; the island chain constrains Chinese power projection outside of its littoral waters. Second, we explore how "gray zone strategies"—strategies that exploit ambiguity about actors or territorial jurisdiction—risk creating contingencies that trap actors into escalatory paths. China's use of incremental "salami tactics" in the Sino-Japanese dispute over the Senkaku Islands—Diaoyu Islands, as called by China—can easily trigger miscalculations resulting in a larger conflict involving the United States.² Once the initial hostilities have started, perceived windows of opportunity may precipitate escalatory policies from China and the U.S. due to their larger strategic goals.³ Moreover, nationalist-populist politics on both sides are likely to fuel rather than dampen such escalatory policies. Within this dynamic, both regional and extra-regional actors such as South Korea and European states, respectively, will be prompted to join the conflict or actively avoid it. With the U.S. distracted, Russia and North Korea are likely to explore opportunities to achieve incremental or sudden political gains. In sum, a conflict starting between Japan and China in the East China Sea would have major consequences across the globe.

² Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 66.

³ T. V. Paul, "Time Pressure and War Initiation: Some Linkages," *Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue Canadienne de Science Politique* 28, no. 2 (June 1995): 255-76.

Strategic objectives and geographic constraints: sizing up the strategies of key actors in the Pacific

The section below examines key actors in the East China Sea, their political-strategic goals at the level of national grand strategy,⁴ the geographic constraints they operate under, and their maritime strategies. It focuses in particular on China, Japan, and the US.

What is at stake in the East China Sea?

The East China Sea covers the maritime region from the coasts of China, with its northern end between the Jeju Island and the mouth of the Yangtze River on China's eastern coast, to the Kyushu and Ryukyu islands of Japan in the east, to the South China Sea in the south.⁵ Crucially, the eastern boundaries of this maritime space coincide with part of China's First Island Chain, a string of islands that stretches from the Kuril Islands, the Japanese Archipelago, the Ryukyu Islands, to Taiwan, and south to the Northern Philippines, and Borneo, which provides a formidable obstacle for China to overcome should it want to project power into the Western Pacific.

⁴ Grand strategy encompasses the highest level of statecraft, including diplomatic, military, economic, and other means, through which states can pursue a range of perceived national interests, of which the most important often is security. Paul Van Hooft, *Grand Strategy* (Oxford University Press, 2017). Indeed, Barry Posen refers to grand strategy as a theory for how states can cause security for themselves. Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Cornell University Press, 1984), 1. Yet, other interests such as the nature of order, or narrow sectoral interests, may also drive national grand strategies. Jeffrey W. Legro, *Rethinking the World: Great Power Strategies and International Order* (Cornell University Press, 2005); Kevin Narizny, *The Political Economy of Grand Strategy* (Cornell University Press, 2007).

⁵ "East China Sea - Economic Aspects," Britannica, accessed July 15, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/place/East-China-Sea>.

· China

China seeks to solidify its presence in the East China Sea, to make sure it is not denied access to its near seas and has the ability to establish control beyond the First Island Chain. Chinese strategy is to normalize its presence through exercising law enforcement rights and taking over exclusive control, while avoiding armed conflict.⁶ Broader political-ideological goals further drive China which challenge the regional order that the US still largely dominates. For China, these goals are broadly stated as “national rejuvenation” and achieving the “Chinese dream”, deeply entwined with the CCP’s desire to justify its power to Chinese society. Establishing a hold of the East China Sea, its perceived backyard, would go a long way to consolidate its power for the Party.⁷ China’s goal is to take the position as dominant power in the region from Japan. To achieve this, China looks to challenge the administrative control over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. Regular naval and air activities in the ECS provide the Chinese armed forces with operational experiences.⁸ Besides the East China Sea, primary Chinese territorial concerns are also Taiwan and the South China Sea - both located in close proximity.⁹

The East China Sea contains at least three key maritime security concerns for China: (1) its economic center being easily accessible and thus vulnerable to attack from the sea, (2) its need to halt Taiwan’s independence through being able to deter the U.S. Navy if it seeks to support Taiwan, and (3) its central role in enabling Chinese

6 Patalano, “What Is China’s Strategy in the Senkaku Islands?”

7 Kristen Gunness, “China’s Gray-Zone Capabilities in the East China Sea,” NBR Special Report (The National Bureau of Asian Research, May 2021), 12, https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr90_murkywaters_may2021.pdf.

8 Edmund J. Burke et al, “China’s Military Activities in the East China Sea. Implications for Japan’s Air Self Defense Force” (RAND Corporation, 2018), 25, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2574.html.

9 Peter Kouretsos, “Tightening the Chain: Implementing a Strategy of Maritime Pressure in the Pacific,” *CIMSEC*, October 2, 2019, <https://cimsec.org/tag/first-island-chain/>. Kouretsos.

power projection.¹⁰ China is the de facto maritime power in the East China Sea, as the U.S. and Japan lack an equal footprint.¹¹ The ECS is a source of tension due to distinct but interrelated territorial disputes caused by overlapping jurisdictional claims over maritime areas.¹² Crucial Chinese and Japanese shipping lanes lead through the ECS and as 6 of China's 10 largest commercial ports can only be accessed through the ECS, unresolved sovereignty issues could lead to conflict due to the economic repercussions of losing shipping access.¹³

China has various overlapping claims in the ECS that are strongly tied to Chinese foreign policy. First and foremost is the territorial dispute China has with Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Should China manage to establish control over Senkaku/Diaoyu, it would change the prevailing regional order. It would push the American alliance network further outside the First Island Chain, which constrains US power projection, as Japan is China's main regional rival.¹⁴ The territorial claims to Senkaku/Diaoyu are highlighted by their inclusion the Chinese and Japanese Air Defense Identification Zones (ADIZ) and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ), adding legal dimensions to the dispute.¹⁵ As these islands are uninhabited, China also seeks to exercise maritime law enforcement rights in the territorial waters surrounding the islands, which requires a higher Chinese maritime law enforcement presence in the ECS.¹⁶ Second, and lesser known to US and European audiences, is the maritime

¹⁰ Michael McDevitt et al., "The Long Littoral Project: East China and Yellow Seas. A Maritime Perspective on Indo-Pacific Security" (CNA, September 2012), 10, https://www.cna.org/archive/CNA_Files/pdf/iop-2012-u-002207-final.pdf.

¹¹ Blasko and Odgaard, "Peaceful Coexistence, Deterrence and Active Defence in China's East China Sea Strategy."

¹² Rebecca Strating, "Maritime and Sovereignty Disputes in the East China Sea," *The National Bureau of Asian Research*, February 9, 2021, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/maritime-and-sovereignty-disputes-in-the-east-china-sea/>.

¹³ McDevitt et al., "The Long Littoral Project: East China and Yellow Seas. A Maritime Perspective on Indo-Pacific Security."

¹⁴ Akram and Tariq, "Xi Jinping's Policy Towards Japan."

¹⁵ "Promoting Crisis Management in the East China Sea," SIPRI, accessed May 6, 2022, [sipri.org/research/conflict-peace-and-security/asia/promoting-crisis-management-east-china-sea](https://www.sipri.org/research/conflict-peace-and-security/asia/promoting-crisis-management-east-china-sea).

¹⁶ Alessio Patalano, "What Is China's Strategy in the Senkaku Islands?," *War on the Rocks*, September 10, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/09/what-is-chinas-strategy-in-the-senkaku-islands/>.

boundary dispute between China and South Korea over Socotra Rock, or Suyan Jiao/Ieodo as China and South Korea refer to it, respectively. A third example of overlapping boundaries in the East China Sea is the overlapping Air Defense Identification Zones (ADIZ) in the East China Sea between Taiwan, South Korea and Japan, which China regularly sends air patrols through.¹⁷

· Japan

Japan's goal in the East China Sea is two-fold: broadly, to maintain an open and free maritime order and more narrowly, to maintain its territories. Japan's influence in the East China Sea is challenged by China and it struggles to keep its hold on the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, as China becomes increasingly assertive. Both countries compete for economic opportunities and diplomatic influence within the region.¹⁸ Chinese assertion over the disputed islands requires Japan to maintain a strong presence and fleet resources in the East China Sea for patrolling and surveillance duties.¹⁹ However, not only territorial disputes keep Japan busy. The overlapping ADIZs and the persistent scrambling against both Chinese and Russian warplanes of the Japanese Air Self Defense Force (JASDF),²⁰ require resources, fast responses and a continuous presence in the East China Sea, not only with the JMSDF but also the JASDF. Since 2012 China has further increased its amount of sorties near Japan, and the continuous scrambling raises concerns over the erosion of the JASDF's

¹⁷ David Axe, "To Defeat China In War, Strangle Its Economy: Expert," *Forbes*, accessed August 13, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidaxe/2020/08/24/to-defeat-china-in-war-strangle-its-economy/>.

¹⁸ Burke et al., "China's Military Activities in the East China Sea. Implications for Japan's Air Self Defense Force."

¹⁹ John Bradford, "Southeast Asia: A New Strategic Nexus for Japan's Maritime Strategy," *CIMSEC*, September 21, 2020, <https://cimsec.org/southeast-asia-a-new-strategic-nexus-for-japans-maritime-strategy/#:~:text=Japan's%20maritime%20strategy%20is%20fundamentally,security%20are%20safe%20and%20secure.>

²⁰ Bradford.

combat readiness.²¹

The Issue of Taiwan's status has led to further deterioration of Sino-Japanese relations. Japan is increasingly showing public support for Taiwan, with the Japanese deputy defense minister Nakayama stating in 2021 that Japan needs to protect Taiwan as it is a democratic country.²² Such statements hint at possible Japanese involvement should China attempt to reintegrate the island into mainland China through military force. As tensions between Taiwan and China grow, Japan intends to increase its armed capabilities in the East China Sea.²³

Besides naval confrontations in the ECS, Chinese incursions of the Japanese ADIZ have been increasing steadily since 2010²⁴. Japan intercepted 785 inbound flights in the fiscal year 2020-2021, the majority being Chinese, most of them over the Okinawa islands, which are only 500kms north of Taiwan and in the ECS.²⁵ As part of the Chinese power projection strategy, China defends its perceived territory and searches for holes in the Japanese air defense. By forcing Japan to focus on its defense against China, Japan has less bandwidth to support Taiwan in a possible contingency, as the JASDF is tied up in direct threats to Japan's immediate claims.

²¹ Burke et al., "China's Military Activities in the East China Sea. Implications for Japan's Air Self Defense Force."

²² Anthony Kuhn, "After Being Silent For Decades, Japan Now Speaks Up About Taiwan — And Angers China," *NPR*, August 2, 2021, sec. Asia, <https://www.npr.org/2021/07/26/1020866539/japans-position-on-defending-taiwan-has-taken-a-remarkable-shift>. Kuhn.

²³ Ajeet Kumar, "Japan Boosting Defence Capabilities in East China Sea amid Increasing Threats: Report," *Republic World*, May 10, 2022, <https://www.republicworld.com/world-news/rest-of-the-world-news/japan-boosting-defence-capabilities-in-east-china-sea-amid-increasing-threats-report-articleshow.html>. Kumar.

²⁴ Mercedes Trent, "Number of Chinese Unauthorized ADIZ Intrusions by Year & Country," *Over the Line. The Implications of China's ADIZ Intrusions in Northeast Asia* (Federation of American Scientists, 2020), https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep26130.8.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Ae14e16db6db6720468d1ec8c701fae49&ab_segments=&origin=&acceptTC=1. Trent.

²⁵ Sakshi Tiwari, "Exhausting Japanese Air Force, Chinese, Russian Incursions Forced Tokyo To Scramble Its Fighters Over 700 Times In 9 Months," *The EurAsian Times*, January 27, 2022, <https://eurasantimes.com/exhausting-japanese-air-force-chinese-russian-incursions-tokyo/>. Tiwari.

· United States

For the US, China is the “pacing threat” within its defense planning and the only state that can mount a full-on challenge to US hegemony.²⁶ For the Chinese challenge to manifest itself, it must deny US command in the Western Pacific, and gain its own maritime command over the region. Consequently, the ECS holds great importance to the US as it borders American allies: Japan, South Korea, the Philippines and Taiwan.²⁷ The US is bound via its defence treaty with Japan to assist its partner country in event of conflict, according to Art.5 of the US-Japan security treaty.²⁸ Since Obama, the commitment to defend Japan has included the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands; President Biden even stated explicitly that the US would defend the islands should they be attacked by China.²⁹ As both the second dominant power in the ECS and a core US ally in the region, Japan needs to protect not only its own interests but it also forms a key component for US security interests in the region. Whether China can dislodge the US from the region is debatable; however, US command of the maritime commons is no longer ensured due to China’s increased Anti-Access Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities.³⁰ Yet, US command is necessary to reinforce its allies and

²⁶ Department of Defense, *Fact Sheet: 2022 National Defense Strategy* (Washington D.C.: Department of Defense, 2022). In this sense, the Biden Administration’s outlook overlaps with that of the Trump administration’s. Jim Mattis, “National Defense Strategy of the United States of America” (Washington D.C.: Department of Defense, 2018).

²⁷ “U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress,” CRS Report (Congressional Research Service, January 26, 2022), <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/R42784.pdf>.

²⁸ “Tensions in the East China Sea,” *Center for Preventive Action*, May 4, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/tensions-east-china-sea>.

²⁹ John Feng, “Joe Biden Vows to Defend Senkaku Islands If Attacked by China,” *Newsweek*, October 5, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/joe-biden-vows-defend-senkaku-islands-attacked-china-japan-1635561>; Rachel Bernstein, “Foreword to Murky Waters in the East China Sea,” *The National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR)* (blog), May 25, 2021, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/foreword-to-murky-waters-in-the-east-china-sea/>. Feng, “Joe Biden Vows to Defend Senkaku Islands If Attacked by China”; Bernstein, “Foreword to Murky Waters in the East China Sea.”

³⁰ Stephen Biddle and Ivan Oelrich, “Future Warfare in the Western Pacific: Chinese Antiaccess/Area Denial, US AirSea Battle, and Command of the Commons in East Asia,” *International Security*, 2016; Evan Braden Montgomery, “Contested Primacy in the Western Pacific: China’s Rise and the Future of US Power Projection,” *International Security* 38, no. 4 (2014): 115-49; Sam Tangredi, *Anti-Access Warfare: Countering Anti-Access and Area-Denial Strategies* (Naval Institute Press, 2013).

partners, while access to their territories is necessary to retain command.³¹

What is the distribution of military capabilities in the East China?

China's military capabilities in the East China Sea have improved significantly over the last decade, including the rapid modernization of Chinese law enforcement capabilities.³² China has dramatically expanded its naval capabilities both in qualitative and quantitative terms. It is now capable of regional maritime power projection based on a naval force structure which leans heavily on destroyers, frigates and corvettes and its arsenal A2/AD capabilities.³³ In terms of capacity improvement, China is expanding its air and naval bases along the East China Sea, including the naval base at Xiangshan, which was developed to include an underground submarine tunnel, and the bases at Dinghai and Zhoushan, pre-existing facilities which are expected to receive several new piers and repairs facilities. Naval air bases have also been upgraded with hardened hangers and runway improvement to allow for placement of H-6 bombers in Danyang, with similar upgrades planned for Longtian and Huian bases and a new air base near Xiapu³⁴.

China has also been developing a range of capabilities that allow it to conduct grey zone operations, which aim to coerce through aggressive means but stay

³¹ Paul Van Hoof, "All-in or All-out: Why Insularity Pushes and Pulls American Grand Strategy to Extremes," *Security Studies*, 2020.

³² Mathieu Duchâtel, "China's Policy in the East China Sea: The Role of Crisis Management Mechanism Negotiations with Japan (2008-2015)," *China Perspectives* 2016, no. 3 (September 1, 2016): 17, <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.7021>.

³³ How is China Modernizing its Navy? | ChinaPower Project (csis.org) ; Yes, China Has the World's Largest Navy. That Matters Less Than You Might Think. - The Diplomat

³⁴ Felix K. Chang, "The Ryukyu Defense Line: Japan's Response to China's Naval Push into the Pacific Ocean," *FPRI*, February 8, 2021, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2021/02/the-ryukyu-defense-line-japans-response-to-chinas-naval-push-into-the-pacific-ocean/>.

under the threshold of open conflict through the exploitation of ambiguity.³⁵ These include more conventional capabilities like the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) and the Armed Forces Maritime Militia, but also more unconventional ones like information operations, cyber, space and electronic warfare.³⁶ The CCG has tried persistently to change the status quo of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands through patrols. The CCG outnumbered the Japanese Coast Guard (JCG) and has generally larger ships, even frigate-converted ships with guns.³⁷ The CCG has the capacity to overwhelm the JCG; four CCG ships sail daily around the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands since 2016.³⁸ The PLA has also been sending out its intelligence-gathering ships and aircrafts closer to the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, intensifying its operations around Taiwan and expanding operations towards the main islands of Japan.³⁹ More specifically, these grey zone operations include the attempt to assert administrative control over disputed maritime territory to establish a de facto Chinese presence, controlling energy and fishing resources and influencing regional rules and norms that affect the territorial claims.⁴⁰ Primarily, these operations focus on testing Japan's response to a continuous challenge in the maritime and air realm around Senkaku/Diaoyu.⁴¹ Between 2013–2020, China sent planes into the Japanese, South Korean and Taiwanese ADIZ at least 4,400 times.⁴² In 2021, China flew 165 sorties through Taiwan's southwestern ADIZ.⁴³

³⁵ Michael Green et al., "Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia: The Theory and Practice of Gray Zone Deterrence," 2017; Hal Brands, "Paradoxes of the Gray Zone," *Available at SSRN 2737593*, 2016.

³⁶ Gunness, "China's Gray-Zone Capabilities in the East China Sea," 11. Gunness, 11.

³⁷ Duchâtel, "China's Policy in the East China Sea," 18. "Trends in China Coast Guard and Other Vessels in the Waters Surrounding the Senkaku Islands, and Japan's Response," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, May 30, 2022, https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/page23e_000021.html.

³⁸ Sayers Eric and Kotani Tetsuo, "#2 AN ALLIANCE STRATEGY FOR THE EAST CHINA SEA | Asia Strategy Initiative," *Sasakawa Peace Foundation* (blog), September 2019, <https://www.spf.org/jpus-insights/spf-asia-initiative-en/spf-asia-initiative002.html>. Sayers and Kotani.

³⁹ Sayers and Kotani, "#2 AN ALLIANCE STRATEGY FOR THE EAST CHINA SEA | Asia Strategy Initiative."

⁴⁰ Gunness, "China's Gray-Zone Capabilities in the East China Sea."

⁴¹ Gunness.

⁴² Axe, "To Defeat China In War, Strangle Its Economy."

⁴³ China usually flies KQ-200 anti-submarine warfare and maritime patrol ASW-MP aircraft sorties through Taiwan's ADIZ. Olli Pekka Suorsa and Adrian Ang U-Jin, "The Changing Pattern of China's Aircraft Incursions Into Taiwan's

To further underline the capabilities in the region, the United States maintains around 25,000 troops in South Korea⁴⁴ and 73,000 in Japan spread over 120 bases in the two countries⁴⁵. The U.S. Forces Korea further has 90 combat planes, 40 attack helicopters, 50 tanks and around 60 Patriot missile launchers as equipment and houses the largest overseas military base.⁴⁶ Additionally, the United States has 12,000 military-related personnel stationed in Guam.⁴⁷ The United States is planning for a contingency. This is clear from the new American destroyers deployed to Japan.⁴⁸ In Sasebo, the southwestern prefecture of Nagasaki and significantly closer to Taiwan, nine more American ships are to be stationed there effective [when?].⁴⁹

Japan pursues an A2/AD strategy to strengthen its presence in the East China Sea⁵⁰ by establishing anti-air and anti-ship missiles at strategic points along the Nansei Shoto island chain⁵¹ and investing in submarine warfare. The Chinese Navy has comparatively poor anti-submarine warfare capabilities, so Japan's investment

ADIZ," *The Diplomat*, May 13, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/the-changing-pattern-of-chinas-aircraft-incursions-into-taiwans-adiz/>. Pekka Suorsa and Ang U-Jin.

⁴⁴ Hyonhee Shin and Joyce Lee, "Factbox: U.S. and South Korea's Security Arrangement, Cost of Troops," *Reuters*, March 8, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southkorea-usa-alliance-idUSKBN2AZ0S0>. Shin and Lee.

⁴⁵ Mohammed Hussein and Mohammed Haddad, "Infographic History of US Interventions in the Past 70 Years," *Aljazeera*, September 10, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/10/infographic-us-military-presence-around-the-world-interactive>. Hussein and Haddad.

⁴⁶ Shin and Lee, "Factbox: U.S. and South Korea's Security Arrangement, Cost of Troops"; Hussein and Haddad, "Infographic History of US Interventions in the Past 70 Years." Shin and Lee, "Factbox: U.S. and South Korea's Security Arrangement, Cost of Troops"; Hussein and Haddad, "Infographic History of US Interventions in the Past 70 Years."

⁴⁷ "Guam: Andersen Air Force Base: What You Need to Know," InCharge Debt Solutions, accessed June 13, 2022, <https://www.incharge.org/military-money/military-life/guam-andersen-air-force-base-cost-of-living-schools-housing-employment-recreation/>. "Guam."

⁴⁸ Sakshi Tiwari, "US Navy Amassess Its 'Most Advanced' Warships In Japan To Hunt Chinese Submarines, Defend Taiwan," *The EurAsian Times*, May 10, 2022, <https://eurasianimes.com/us-navy-amassess-its-most-advanced-warships-in-japan/>. Tiwari.

⁴⁹ Tiwari, "US Navy Amassess Its 'Most Advanced' Warships In Japan To Hunt Chinese Submarines, Defend Taiwan."

⁵⁰ Franz-Stefan Gady, "This Is Japan's Best Strategy to Defeat China at Sea," *The Diplomat*, February 20, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/02/this-is-japans-best-strategy-to-defeat-china-at-sea/>. Gady.

⁵¹ Benjamin Rimland, "Japan's Maritime Strategy and the Dynamics of Denial," *Tokyo Review*, July 25, 2017, <https://www.tokyoreview.net/2017/07/japans-maritime-strategy-and-the-dynamics-of-denial/>. Rimland.

in _____ is likely to be an effective deterrent. In addition, Japan maintains anti-ship missile batteries on the Ryukyu islands to establish potential choke points and reduce the freedom of action of the Chinese Navy.⁵² Japan has also added destroyers to the Japanese Maritime Self Defence Force (JMSDF) to improve anti-air warfare capabilities and mine-warfare vessels.⁵³ Japan had banned 80 numbers of Chinese fishing ships in 2021 in an effort to undermine Chinese presence.⁵⁴

South Korea maintains impressive naval capabilities with a large-scale navy – the third largest Asian fleet after China and Japan⁵⁵ — but is primarily committed to responding to tactical problems from North Korea. South Korea has increased its defense budget by 6.5% over the last 5 years⁵⁶ and its naval base on Jeju Island allow for a destroyer to be permanently homeported there, as well as having the capacity for 20 combat ships, 3,000 Navy troops and the Submarine Force command.⁵⁷ The Jeju base can host multiple Sejong Class destroyers, submarines and helicopter carriers which can intercept Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBM) allowing South Korea to better defend its maritime interests.⁵⁸

⁵² Chang, “The Ryukyu Defense Line: Japan’s Response to China’s Naval Push into the Pacific Ocean.” Chang.

⁵³ Gady, “This Is Japan’s Best Strategy to Defeat China at Sea.” Gady.

⁵⁴ “Japan Issues Exclusion Orders to 80 Chinese Fishing Ships in 2021,” *Kyodo News*, August 12, 2021, <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2021/08/008ad4067ab0-japan-issues-exclusion-orders-to-80-chinese-fishing-ships-in-2021.html>.

⁵⁵ “The South Korean Navy (ROKN),” *Naval Encyclopedia*, accessed April 7, 2022, <https://naval-encyclopedia.com/cold-war/south-korean-navy-rokn.php>. “The South Korean Navy (ROKN).”

⁵⁶ Tim Fish, “South Korea’s Navy Growing to Counter More Regional Threats Beyond North Korea,” *USNI News* (blog), December 1, 2021, <https://news.usni.org/2021/12/01/south-koreas-navy-growing-to-counter-more-regional-threats-beyond-north-korea>. Fish.

⁵⁷ “ROK Navy Opens New Naval Base on Jeju Island for KDX-III Aegis Destroyers,” *Navy Recognition* (blog), accessed July 1, 2022, <https://www.navyrecognition.com/index.php/newsb/defence-news/2016/february-2016-navy-naval-forces-defense-industry-technology-maritime-security-global-news/3619-rok-navy-opens-new-naval-base-on-jeju-island-for-kdx-iii-aegis-destroyers.html>. “ROK Navy Opens New Naval Base on Jeju Island for KDX-III Aegis Destroyers.”

⁵⁸ Ilya Kim, “Jeju Naval Base Between the People and the National Security - Center for Security Policy Studies,” February 21, 2022, *CSPS* (blog), accessed July 1, 2022, <https://csps.gmu.edu/2021/02/21/jeju-naval-base-between-the-people-and-the-national-security/>. Kim.

The geographic logic of Chinese and U.S. strategies

Within the Western Pacific, the U.S. and China both explicitly pursue strategies that seek to exploit their geographic advantages. The United States' key weakness in the region is its distance from its allies — Japan and the Republic of Korea, and informally Taiwan. The US must be credibly capable of projecting power into the vicinity of China, the most likely threat to the security of these allies.⁵⁹ Particularly, the protection of Taiwan, which is close to the Chinese mainland but far from US bases in Japan or the US territory of Guam, necessitates that the US can quickly deploy air forces as well as naval forces over the large distances of the Pacific Ocean. The US is thus highly dependent on a limited set of assets in the region, with Kadena Airbase on the Japanese island of Okinawa and the US territory of Guam. In this sense, the importance of Taiwan to the United States is not only one of a commitment to protect it — Taiwan is also part of the First Island Chain as the “unsinkable aircraft carrier” that provides an obstacle to possible Chinese power projection.⁶⁰ The US has “solved” the problem of overcoming distances and China's attempts to deny it access by maintaining a military-technological edge that China has so far not been able to negate.⁶¹

As a result, China's strategy to weaken the United States' power protection is to make it difficult and costly. As part of its so-called A2/AD strategy, China has acquired middle-range ballistic missiles with which to target U.S. airbases, ports,

⁵⁹ Paul Van Hooft, “All-in or All-out: Why Insularity Pushes and Pulls American Grand Strategy to Extremes,” *Security Studies*, 2020.

Van Hooft.

⁶⁰ “US Shows China Its Hand on Strategic Value of ‘Unsinkable’ Taiwan,” *Financial Times*, December 29, 2021. “US Shows China Its Hand on Strategic Value of ‘Unsinkable’ Taiwan.”

⁶¹ Andrea Gilli and Mauro Gilli, “Why China Has Not Caught Up Yet: Military-Technological Superiority and the Limits of Imitation, Reverse Engineering, and Cyber Espionage,” *International Security* 43, no. 3 (2019): 141-189; Michael Beckley, *Unrivaled: Why America Will Remain the World's Sole Superpower* (Cornell University Press, 2018). Gilli and Gilli, “Why China Has Not Caught Up Yet”; Beckley, *Unrivaled*.

as well as the aircraft carriers.⁶² Most formidable of these are the DF-21D and DF-26 with which China can certainly target fixed assets within the First Island Chain, such as Kadena Airbase, as well as in all likelihood facilities much further afield like Guam.⁶³ Given the high dependence of the U.S. on a limited pieces of real estate in the region, the Chinese strategy is effectively asymmetric in nature. However, the United States' military-technological capabilities are superior to China's although, China has built the largest navy on the planet in absolute numbers of surface vessels, with a large part of it being relatively low-quality. To overcome this, China has invested in higher-quality vessels such as its 055 type destroyer, which is assumed to be close in quality to the advanced Arleigh Burke destroyers of the U.S. Navy.⁶⁴ China has also invested in building power projection capabilities. In 2022 it launched a third aircraft carrier, and possession of an aircraft carrier does not equal an effective capability. An aircraft carrier cannot operate alone; it must operate jointly with a strike group for its protection as well as have well-trained pilots capable of quickly taking off and landing, and these skills requires significant levels of training and exercises.⁶⁵ The fact that China is investing in an aircraft carrier underlines the growing ambitions of the PLAN and growing discontent with accepting the US-dominated status quo in the region, and its desire to project power across the Western

⁶² Stephen Biddle and Ivan Oelrich, "Future Warfare in the Western Pacific: Chinese Antiaccess/Area Denial, US AirSea Battle, and Command of the Commons in East Asia," *International Security*, 2016; Evan Braden Montgomery, "Contested Primacy in the Western Pacific: China's Rise and the Future of US Power Projection," *International Security* 38, no. 4 (2014): 115-149; Sam Tangredi, *Anti-Access Warfare: Countering Anti-Access and Area-Denial Strategies* (Naval Institute Press, 2013). Biddle and Oelrich, "Future Warfare in the Western Pacific"; Montgomery, "Contested Primacy in the Western Pacific"; Tangredi, *Anti-Access Warfare*.

⁶³ Congressional Research Service, "China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress" (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, March 2021), <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33153.pdf>. Congressional Research Service.

⁶⁴ Eric Heginbotham et al., *The US-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996–2017* (Rand Corporation, 2015); Joris Teer et al., "China's Military Rise and the Implications for European Security" (The Hague Centre For Strategic Studies, November 10, 2021). Heginbotham et al., *The US-China Military Scorecard*; Teer et al., "China's Military Rise and the Implications for European Security."

⁶⁵ Michael C. Horowitz, *The Diffusion of Military Power: Causes and Consequences for International Politics* (Princeton University Press, 2010). Horowitz.

Pacific.⁶⁶

The U.S. has prepared to respond to China's A2/AD strategy with the Joint Concept for Maneuver and Access in the Global Commons (JAM-GC), formerly called AirSea Battle.⁶⁷ In this approach, at the start of a conflict, the U.S. would destroy Chinese A2/AD capabilities swiftly by targeting radars, command and control systems, air defense systems, and missile launchers, including on the Chinese mainland. The JAM-GC remains controversial, as it is highly escalatory; it both raises the existential stakes for China and risks undermining crisis stability by appearing to be a first strike on the Chinese nuclear infrastructure. It could trigger a nuclear response from the Chinese side.⁶⁸

The necessity for the United States to retain access to allies and partners has pushed it to maintain a military-technological edge with which to decisively counter China's ability to deny it this access. The difficulties the United States encounters with access are further underlined by the growing constraints on US power.⁶⁹ Current defense planning assumptions are that the Pentagon would defeat China in Asia, while deterring Russia in Europe, or vice versa.⁷⁰ The United States is under pressure to prove its ability to stand up against China and Russia simultaneously, protecting its

⁶⁶ Teer et al., "China's Military Rise and the Implications for European Security." Teer et al.

⁶⁷ Joint Staff Headquarters, "The Joint Operational Access Concept (JOAC)," *Version 1* (2012): 17. Headquarters.

⁶⁸ Fiona S. Cunningham and M. Taylor Fravel, "Assuring Assured Retaliation: China's Nuclear Posture and US-China Strategic Stability," *International Security* 40, no. 2 (2015): 7-50; Caitlin Talmadge, "Would China Go Nuclear? Assessing the Risk of Chinese Nuclear Escalation in a Conventional War with the United States," *International Security* 41, no. 4 (2017): 50-92. Cunningham and Fravel, "Assuring Assured Retaliation"; Talmadge, "Would China Go Nuclear?"

⁶⁹ Luis Simón, Linde Desmaele, and Jordan Becker, "Europe as a Secondary Theater? Competition with China and the Future of America's European Strategy," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (2021): 90-115; Paul Van Hooft, "The United States May Be Willing, but No Longer Always Able: The Need for Transatlantic Burden Sharing in the Pacific Century," in *The Future of European Strategy in a Changing Geopolitical Environment: Challenges and Prospects*, ed. Michiel Foulon and Jack Thompson (The Hague, Netherlands: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2021). Simón, Desmaele, and Becker, "Europe as a Secondary Theater?"; Van Hooft, "The United States May Be Willing, but No Longer Always Able: The Need for Transatlantic Burden Sharing in the Pacific Century."

⁷⁰ "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy" (Department of Defense, 2018); Department of Defense, *Fact Sheet: 2022 National Defense Strategy* (Washington D.C.: Department of Defense, 2022). "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy"; Department of Defense, *Fact Sheet: 2022 National Defense Strategy*.

allies and partners in Europe and Asia.⁷¹ More recently, U.S. defense planners close to the Biden administration have set a target that the US armed forces should be able to defeat and destroy Chinese naval forces in the South China Sea in 72 hours,⁷² the numbers themselves are less relevant than the demonstrated effort of U.S. defense planners in combatting China.

Geography plays a crucial role. Should China remain confined within the First Island China, it cannot project power in significant ways into the Pacific, let alone further afield; however, within the First Island China, the options for the US, and its partners and allies to expand their denial capabilities are significant.⁷³ The irony is this that, while the U.S. must overcome Chinese denial capabilities to protect allies, China must overcome US and other denial capabilities if it want to have a chance at projecting power within and outside of its own region.⁷⁴ The end result could possibly be a series of overlapping A2/AD bubbles that prevent any actor from commanding or controlling the waters in the Western Pacific and the ECS in particular,⁷⁵ yet, it also means that any actual conflict could be particularly destructive in the opening stages, and not necessarily decisive.⁷⁶

⁷¹ Hal Brands and Evan Braden Montgomery, "Opportunistic Aggression in the Twenty-First Century," *Survival* 62, no. 4 (2020): 157-182. Brands and Montgomery.

⁷² Michèle A. Flournoy, "How to Prevent a War in Asia," November 12, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-06-18/how-prevent-war-asia>. Flournoy.

⁷³ Paul Van Hooft, Nora Nijboer, and Tim Sweijs, "Raising the Costs of Access: Active Denial Strategies by Small and Middle Powers against Revisionist Aggression" (The Hague, Netherlands: The Hague Centre For Strategic Studies, December 2021), <https://hcsc.nl/report/deterrence-raising-the-costs-of-access/>; Eric Heginbotham and Richard J. Samuels, "Active Denial: Redesigning Japan's Response to China's Military Challenge," *International Security* 42, no. 04 (2018): 128-169; Michael Beckley, "The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia: How China's Neighbors Can Check Chinese Naval Expansion," *International Security* 42, no. 2 (2017): 78-119. Van Hooft, Nijboer, and Sweijs, "Raising the Costs of Access"; Heginbotham and Samuels, "Active Denial"; Beckley, "The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia."

⁷⁴ Paul Van Hooft, "Don't Knock Yourself Out: How America Can Turn the Tables on China by Giving up the Fight for Command of the Seas," *War on the Rocks*, February 23, 2021. Van Hooft.

⁷⁵ Patrick Porter, "Advice for a Dark Age: Managing Great Power Competition," *The Washington Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (2019): 7-25. Porter.

⁷⁶ Joshua Rovner, "Two Kinds of Catastrophe: Nuclear Escalation and Protracted War in Asia," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 2017, 1-35. Rovner.

Exploring the future: scenario approach

Our scenario takes the aforementioned structural features and strategic postures as the starting point for conflict in the East China Sea and discusses exploitation of ambiguity, domestic institutions, and general uncertainty in the region. It centers on a potential conflict in the East China Sea between China, Japan, the United States. For our analysis, we assume that none of the actors involved will actively choose for large-scale inter-state violence due to the immense risks involved. Rather, we believe that conflict is more likely to break out from (1) the gradual and extensive build-up of highly destructive capabilities, discussed in the previous sections; and (2) the increased likelihood of an accidental escalation or a Chinese choice to use limited force for limited objectives which is misperceived by the US or other regional actors.

In our scenario, we predict that the current stagnation of China's economic growth persisting in the next decade due to structural problems with the Chinese economy and the CCP's "zero Covid" policy.⁷⁷ As growth slows, the PRC's leadership sees a shrinking window of opportunity to establish its hegemony in the Western part of the Pacific Ocean, or at least to negate U.S. hegemony in the region. PLAN's accumulated capabilities are significant, but not fully equal in quality to those of the U.S., and PLAN service personnel's ability to execute complex joint operations is doubtful. In the scenario, PLAN assesses that equaling U.S. capabilities is not necessary. Its capabilities are considerable and with enough firepower it can present a formidable challenge to the U.S. ability to project power in its vicinity.⁷⁸ The scenario

⁷⁷ "China's Economy Is Slowing, a Worrying Sign for the World - The New York Times," accessed July 11, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/16/business/economy/china-economy.html>; Beckley, *Unrivaled*.

⁷⁸ Van Hooft, "Don't Knock Yourself Out: How America Can Turn the Tables on China by Giving up the Fight for Command of the Seas." Van Hooft.

will show PLAN is looking for weak spots to pressure the existing structure; from diplomatic pressure on smaller states to pushing out its air defense identification zone (ADIZ). It hopes to make incremental gains within the existing order and challenge the legal status quo, as it has done in the South China Sea by building artificial islands.

Scenario: brewing tension, boiling friction: war onset in the East China Sea

It's the year 2028. For about two decades, the CCP had has been using the status of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands as an avenue to challenge the regional maritime order. Since China and Japan clashed diplomatically and economically over the issue of administrative control over the islands to the point of suspending all communication channels in 2012, the PRC has been seeking to normalize its presence near the island in order to bolster its sovereignty claims. More recently, it has started carrying out increasingly aggressive grey zone operations in support of that claim. These were initially limited to the dispatch of civilian fishing vessels that lingered in the area. In 2016, the CCG and more than 200 fishing vessels entered the waters around Senkaku/Diaoyu.⁷⁹ Over the course of the 2020s, however, this has evolved to a permanent presence of maritime militias, civilian in name, but visibly carrying heavy weaponry thus raising the potential of escalation. Their nearly permanent presence has come to include such a large number of ships that single Japanese vessels patrolling the area feel threatened. PLAN law enforcement vessels have been sighted at closer intervals at closer range to the islands' shores. China has also started aggressively enforcing its 2013 declared ADIZ, which encompasses the Senkaku/Diaoyu, which are also part of Japan's ADIZ.

⁷⁹ Ankit Panda, "Japan: 7 Chinese Coast Guard Ships, 230 Fishing Boats in Disputed East China Sea Waters," *The Diplomat*, August 8, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/08/japan-7-chinese-coast-guard-ships-230-fishing-boats-in-disputed-east-china-sea-waters/>.

Crossing wires: civil-military dysfunction

Populist-nationalist policies pursued by the CCP – as well as populist-nationalist beliefs held within the CCP – push the institutions essential for national security decision-making into a more confrontational approach. The narrative of China’s rise and negation of the century of humiliation by foreign imperial adversaries has taken hold at various levels of the bureaucratic apparatus.⁸⁰ Civil servants and officers believe it in varying degrees. But even those who do not fully believe it, have noticed that open belligerence against those who are perceived to have insulted China are being rewarded. The past decade has seen the rise of so-called Wolf Warrior diplomats who use a decidedly un-diplomatic aggressive and abrasive approach to intimidate perceived opponents of China. These diplomats seem to try to outdo themselves in abrasive responses to statements by European, Asia, and other government officials on issues sensitive to China, such as the fate of the Uighur, Hong Kong, or Taiwan.⁸¹ Promotion patterns have made the behavior attractive and given it an official stamp of approval.⁸² For Chinese diplomats and officials who see the risks of alienating states, the writing is on the wall. Moreover, contacts with foreign actors are increasingly shut down.

The trend towards increased confrontational foreign policy is hardly confined to diplomats; the PLA’s confidence in itself and its boldness have grown as China’s military and economic power have drastically grown in the past decades. In the

⁸⁰ Zheng Wang, “National Humiliation, History Education, and the Politics of Historical Memory: Patriotic Education Campaign in China,” *International Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (2008): 783-806; David Scott, *China and the International System, 1840-1949: Power, Presence, and Perceptions in a Century of Humiliation* (Suny Press, 2008).

⁸¹ “Europe’s Wolf Warriors,” POLITICO, September 13, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-china-influencers/>.

⁸² Peter Martin, *China’s Civilian Army: The Making of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy* (Oxford University Press, 2021). Camille Brugier, “‘Wolf Warrior’ Diplomacy: A New Policy to Legitimize the Chinese Communist Party” (Paris, France: IRSEM, June 2021); “Understanding Chinese ‘Wolf Warrior Diplomacy,’” *The National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR)* (blog), accessed July 10, 2022, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/understanding-chinese-wolf-warrior-diplomacy/>.

preceding years, risky behavior such as shooting chaff at an Australian plane,⁸³ if not encouraged, has hardly been reprimanded beyond perfunctory slaps on the wrists. In the 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis, the U.S. humiliated China by demonstratively sailing a carrier strike group through the strait. More than a quarter century later, not only do Chinese A2/AD capabilities make such a move near-suicidal, the PLAN's view of itself would never allow for it. This is worsened by the fact that like many other military organizations in history, the PLA has strong preferences for offensive doctrines and is constantly looking for greater organizational autonomy.⁸⁴ Consequently, a gradual disconnect has emerged over the 2020s, reversing Xi Jinping's attempt to centralize control in the 2010s, between the more gradualist civilian approach of the Party's civilian leadership, and the PLAN's exploration of ways to dislodge the United States. The weakened cohesion between the civilian and military leadership undermines the coherence of Chinese grand strategic ends and means.

Frequent friction, sparks will fly

China's [specific action(s)] have produced frequent frictions between Japan and China, with both countries condemning each other in increasingly hostile terms. Diplomatic discourse is inflected with references to the Second Sino-Japanese War and cartoons of the Japanese Prime Minister depicted as Hideki Tojo - the infamous Japanese general who acted as prime minister and war minister in the 1940s -

⁸³ "Chinese Fighter Jet 'chaffs' Australian Plane near South China Sea, Canberra Alleges - CNN," accessed July 10, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/06/05/australia/australia-china-plane-intercept-intl-hnk-ml/index.html>.

⁸⁴ Andrew Scobell, "Is There a Civil-Military Gap in China's Peaceful Rise?," *Www.Army.Mil*, 2009, https://www.army.mil/article/29554/is_there_a_civil_military_gap_in_chinas_peaceful_rise; "Understanding the Vulnerabilities in China's New Joint Force," 960th Cyberspace Wing, accessed July 15, 2022, <https://www.960cyber.afrc.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/281132/understanding-the-vulnerabilities-in-chinas-new-joint-force/>; Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Cornell University Press, 1984); Jack Snyder, "Civil-Military Relations and the Cult of the Offensive, 1914 and 1984," *International Security* 9, no. 1 (1984): 108-146.

feature commonly on the pages of Chinese state media. Intrusions by Chinese fighter jets of Japanese airspace are now almost a daily occurrence while the Japanese Self Defense Force planes are scrambling each time to escort them out. In the latest close encounter, China sent a staggering number of eight squadrons of Chengdu J-20 fifth generation fighter jets that temporarily outnumbered the scrambled Japanese air force.

In the midst of these tensions, two main developments in conjunction with each other could ignite _____: the weakening of the Chinese economy and the discovery of gas reserves in the East China Sea. A downturn in the Chinese economy that lowers growth to the single digits for the first time in three generations would contradict the very foundation of the modern Chinese social contract in which an ever-larger contingent of middle class citizens accept the constraints imposed upon their freedom by the CCP in return for stability and the consistent increase of their living standards.⁸⁵ As a result, the economic downturn leads to a financial crisis that hits at the heart of China's economy, when the financial behemoth Evergrande first falters and then falls. If, this time, the CCP does not save it from bankruptcy, social unrest will develop in the larger cities in the Yangtze River Delta, and threatens to spread to other regions of the country when the closure of production facilities leads to an exodus of labor migrants back to their home villages. The second development is the discovery of the largest reservoir of gas reserves south-east of the Chunxiao/Shirakaba field. Increasingly vocal Chinese business leaders assert that these reserves rightfully belong to China thus joining forces with the PLAN leadership and the more hawkish Wolf Warriors within the Xi Jinping Regime (in a 21st century incarnation of the so-called Iron and Rye coalition that aggravated polarization in Europe prior

⁸⁵ The party and the people: Chinese politics in the 21st century The party and the people: Chinese politics in the 21st century. By Bruce J Dickson. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2021. 315pp. £24.63. ISBN978 0 69118 664 1. Joshua Ball, "An Economic Downturn in China Is the Greatest Threat to Chinese Domestic Security," *Global Security Review* (blog), May 28, 2018, <https://globalsecurityreview.com/degree-chinas-internal-stability-depend-economic-growth/>.

to the First World War). The Chinese leadership seeks to regain the initiative by refocusing attention on the contested Senkaku/Diaoyu islands ratcheting up pressure by executing a grey zone operation under the cover of increasingly questionable deniability, a vessel in the maritime militia, lands ashore on Minamikojima, one of the islands in the chain, and plants a very large PRC national flag. The powerful image is picked up by the Japanese *Nippon Television Network* that is shooting an item about the contested islands. When the image is broadcasted on Japanese national television, the waving red flag with the five golden stars, causes an outcry amongst the populace putting pressure on the Japanese Cabinet to respond robustly.⁸⁶

In this context, both U.S. and Japanese officials struggle to parse through narratives coming from China to determine the “official” narratives and those of specific factions. The moderates within the Party's civilian leadership seem to have been losing ground to the more hawkish Wolf Warriors and senior PLAN officers. U.S. and Japanese intelligence services, however, have failed to recruit high ranking officials inside China and are not able to get a good read of what is happening inside the confines of the inner court *Zhongnanhai* (中南海). Yet, both the Americans and the Japanese vividly remember the rise of the militarists in the Japan starting in the late 1920s that forced Japan's civilian leadership to pursue an increasingly aggressive policy eventually embroiling the entire continent in the great Pacific War. One hundred years later, they fear for a repetition of the scenario within China this time over. When aggressive statements by mid-level officers in the People's Daily about China's latest grey zone action fuel concern that it is the prelude to an even larger invasion of the islands soon, the Japanese Prime Minister finds he has no other option than a strong response.

⁸⁶ A Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesperson said in 2015 that “No matter what others say or do, the fact that the Diaoyu Islands belong to China cannot be changed”, and China released a report on the topography and geography of Senkaku/Diaoyu which reaffirmed Chinese sovereignty via a special website of islands from the Ministry of natural Resources.

First domino: Chinese provocations, Japanese pushback

A diplomatic complaint raised by the Japanese government in response to the PLAN provocations near the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands and Chinese intrusions into the Japanese and Korean ADIZ in the East China Sea provokes further provocations. The Japanese complaint is unusually terse and itself a feature of the increasingly confident regional policy of the Japanese government. The Chinese diplomatic response is harsh, and Beijing responds with another provocation . Previous provocations through the Japanese nationalization of the islands led China to normalize its Coast Guard routes in the waters around the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.⁸⁷ After the complaint, China increases the size and frequency of its CCG patrols around the islands.⁸⁸

Claiming engine trouble, a Chinese law enforcement vessel lands on the shore of the Uotsuri-shima/Diaoyu Dao island, which is seen as escalatory behavior, whether or not deliberate. In response, Tokyo dispatches its own law enforcement vessel to the islands. Since 2021, the CCG is allowed to forcibly board noncompliant foreign vessels engaged in illegal activity in Chinese waters while the JCG is allowed to fire at foreign vessels aiming to land personnel on the islands.⁸⁹ This legalization of the use of means both sides are more willing to use violence to defend their territory. After a short scuffle which results in several wounded on both sides, Japanese officers arrest the Chinese crew, prompting outcry from hardliners in China.

Shortly after, the captain of a PLAN vessel attempts to intercept and stop the Japanese law enforcement vessels that have gathered with order to collect the PLAN crew. His aggressive attempts to head the Japanese vessels off leads to a collision between the PLAN ship with one of the Japanese escort vessels. The Japanese ship

⁸⁷ Akram and Tariq, "Xi Jinping's Policy Towards Japan."

⁸⁸ Akram and Tariq.

⁸⁹ Xiaolin Duan, "China's Strategic Thinking on the Diaoyu/Senkaku Island Dispute," *E-International Relations* (blog), June 26, 2022, <https://www.e-ir.info/2022/06/26/chinas-strategic-thinking-on-the-diaoyu-senkaku-island-dispute/>.

begins to sink, though its crew is rescued by the other Japanese vessels in the vicinity. The captured Chinese crew remains on the island, under guard. The Japanese government expresses its outrage at the aggressive actions of the Chinese captain, dismisses the Chinese ambassador from Tokyo, and demands an apology from Beijing. It also sends additional vessels from its Self Defense Forces to reinforce the ships already in the region.

As the status quo ex ante slips out of reach, the PLAN decides it will not accept the capture of its crew and that the opportunity to free them will be lost when the Japanese reinforcements arrive. It therefore moves swiftly; the PLAN unloads a unit of marines onto the island to free the captured crew. The Japanese government cannot accept this negation of its territorial integrity; it invokes the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty—which president Biden had affirmed applies to the islands—and requests US assistance to restore its sovereignty over the islands.

Containment, contagion and spillover: regional and extra-regional responses

Given Chinese provocations, the US administration has few incentives to dampen the escalatory dynamics. Any US president is constrained by public opinion and fears appearing weak in foreign policy. These pressures are vastly greater in the American political system than the Chinese one, specifically for a president from the Democratic Party.⁹⁹ Since the late 1940s, Democrats have been vulnerable to accusations of weakness by Republicans, despite being the party whose president(s) led and won the wars against Germany and Japan from 1941 to 1945. Ironically, given the scenario, it was the “loss of China” in 1949 and accusations of pro-Communist sympathies that haunted Democratic politicians, often boxing them in to respond more strongly to pressure to act forcefully on the international stage. A strong response would also be likely because the perceived threat of China is arguably the one remaining policy issue that both Republicans and Democrats agree on in a US system increasingly paralyzed by political polarization. Facing low approval ratings and partisan politics, the US president decides they cannot afford to falter towards China. Nor, in light of concerns within the Pentagon and State Department that the current administration appears hesitant and ambivalent towards US allies, can the administration afford to act too slowly on the international stage.

⁹⁹ The Vietnam War is often used as an example where Democratic presidents felt more constrained than Republicans, and President Nixon’s history of virulent anti-Communism gave him the leeway to engage with China. Philip Wander, “The Rhetoric of American Foreign Policy,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70, no. 4 (1984): 339-61; Michael S. Sherry, *In the Shadow of War: The United States since the 1930s* (Yale University Press, 1995).

Korean Peninsula

In contrast to the U.S., and, to some extent, Japan, South Korea's response to any incidents in the East China Sea is carefully calculated. Despite being embedded in the American security alliance architecture⁹¹, South Korea's primary security concern in the region is North Korea. However, the lingering tensions with Japan as a former colonizer continue to strain trilateral relations with the United States and Japan and limits the contingencies with which Korea is willing to partner with Japan, namely to a North Korea contingency.⁹² Additionally, despite clashed over the placement of the THAAD missile defense system, China is South Korea's largest trading partner.⁹³ Due to the threat from North Korea, the East China Sea cannot be given the highest priority despite the outstanding maritime boundary dispute with China over Socotra Rock and overlapping ADIZ claims with China and South Korea and Japan in the East China Sea. South Korea is not expected to immediately engage in conflict over Senkaku/Diaoyu, as the ROK also has an outstanding territorial dispute with Japan over Dokdo/Takeshima in the East Sea, and taking a stance on the Senkaku/Diaoyu issue could negatively impact the strength of South Korea's argument for ownership of Dokdo/Takeshima. In addition, do to South Korea's strong economic ties with China, it is unlikely that South Korea would be first defend Taiwan in a contingency, for fear of economic repercussions from China.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Tobias Harris, Abigail Bard, and Haneul Lee, "Southeast Asia: The Next Frontier of the U.S.-South Korea Alliance," *Center for American Progress* (blog), December 20, 2021, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/southeast-asia-the-next-frontier-of-the-u-s-south-korea-alliance/>.

⁹² Sue Mi Terry, "Biden and Yoon Have a Chance to Reshape the U.S.-South Korea Alliance for the 21st Century | Wilson Center," *The Wilson Center*, May 18, 2022, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/biden-and-yoon-have-chance-reshape-us-south-korea-alliance-21st-century>.

⁹³ "South Korean Prez Yoon to Reduce Reliance on Chinese Imports," *The Print*, May 22, 2022, <https://theprint.in/world/south-korean-prez-yoon-to-reduce-reliance-on-chinese-imports/966714/>; Jianguo Huo, "Cooperation with China Crucial to South Korean Economy," *The Global Times*, April 8, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1196686.shtml>.

⁹⁴ Yun Sun, "South Korea and the Taiwan Contingency: The Chinese View," *Stimson Center* (blog), February 23, 2022, <https://www.stimson.org/2022/south-korea-and-the-taiwan-contingency-the-chinese-view/>.

Yet, as the South Korean government enhances its economic and security relations with the U.S., its relationship with China is projected to suffer,⁹⁵ suggesting that South Korea's decisive participation in East China Sea contingencies may have less relative impact. However, we assume that South Korea, balancing a security alliance with the United States and an economic relationship with China, responds carefully as the events in the East China Sea escalate in this scenario.

While Japan is occupied by East China Sea territorial disputes and South Korea is cautiously observing and preparing its navy, North Korea aims to pressure South Korea into concessions. North Korea's nuclear strategy of coercive diplomacy through threatening to resume nuclear and missile testing to blackmail South Korea and the U.S. has previously proven effective.⁹⁶ Blackmailing South Korea into additional concessions and the US to lift sanctions on North Korea during a time of high tensions through its nuclear strategy adds another layer of tension to the countries involved in the East China Sea.

Europe and Russia

The European role in the ECS conflict is extremely limited in military terms. While European states have dramatically raised their defence spending in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, by 2027 those investments have not yet manifested in the maritime domain. After all, shoring up the collective defence and deterrence capabilities in the European theatre has primarily focused on strengthening capabilities in the air- and land domains, and after that on the maritime domain

⁹⁵ Christy Lee, "South Korea's Alignment With US at Odds With China, Analysts Say," *VOA News*, June 1, 2022, 2, <https://www.voanews.com/a/south-korea-s-alignment-with-us-at-odds-with-china-analysts-say-/6599855.html>. Lee, 2.

⁹⁶ Khang Vu, "North Korea's Emerging Blackmail Strategy," *The Lowy Institute*, November 30, 2018, <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/north-korea-emerging-blackmail-strategy>.

- and then still primarily on anti-submarine warfare capabilities to protect the approaches to Europe and the underwater infrastructure around Europe.

However, Europe's experience with Russia's revisionist aggression in Ukraine, has woken them up to the implications of China's actions in the Western Pacific. The EU is deeply unsettled by the growing hostility in the East China Sea. A collection of European states, including France, Germany, and the Netherlands, as well as the EU itself, have published their strategies for the Indo-Pacific region mere years before - and the UK dedicated significant attention to it in its integrated review.⁹⁷ The last NATO Strategic Concept from 2022 also noted the importance of the open and free order in the Indo-Pacific, and the potential challenge that China poses to that order.⁹⁸ The Europeans have also built up their naval presence across the vast expanse of the Indo-Pacific during the years preceding the outbreak of conflict. As in 2021, a British-led carrier group is navigating the Strait of Malacca with the intention to head north to Japan. A Dutch ship is again part of the carrier group.⁹⁹ Like their German counterparts, the Netherlands has pledged to send a ship to the Pacific at least once every two years. Yet, the Dutch frigate has limited defensive

⁹⁷ "French Strategy In The Indo-Pacific 'For An Inclusive Indo-Pacific'" (Paris: Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, June 2019); The Federal Government, "Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific Region," September 2020, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2380514/f9784f7e3b3fa1bd7c5446d274a4169e/200901-indo-pazifik-leitlinien--1--data.pdf>; "Indo-Pacific: Guidelines for Strengthening Dutch and EU Cooperation with Partners in Asia" (Government of the Netherlands, November 2020); "Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy" (HM Government, March 2021), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/969402/The_Integrated_Review_of_Security__Defence_Development_and_Foreign_Policy.pdf; European Commission, "EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific," Text (European Union, September 16, 2021), https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA_21_4709. "French Strategy In The Indo-Pacific 'For An Inclusive Indo-Pacific'"; The Federal Government, "Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific Region"; "Indo-Pacific: Guidelines for Strengthening Dutch and EU Cooperation with Partners in Asia"; "Global Britain in a Competitive Age"; European Commission, "EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific."

⁹⁸ "NATO 2022 - Strategic Concept," accessed July 11, 2022, <https://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/index.html>. "NATO 2022 - Strategic Concept."

⁹⁹ George Allison, "British Carrier Strike Group to Sail through South China Sea," UKDJ, April 28, 2021, <https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/british-carrier-strike-group-to-sail-through-south-china-sea/>. Allison.

means.¹⁰⁹ In any case, arming the ship was considered too aggressive by the Dutch parliament when debating the deployment of the vessel to the Pacific and deemed to undermine its mission of naval diplomacy. The Dutch bind is exemplary for the problems the other Europeans face as well. Despite recent and upcoming investments in the wake of the Russo-Ukraine War, European navies have hit their ceiling in terms of deployable ships for the Indo-Pacific simply by participating in the carrier group while simultaneously conducting anti-piracy tasks in the Red Sea and near the Persian Gulf; all other naval assets are deployed in the broader Euro-Atlantic area which stretches from the high north, the Baltics, the North Sea, the Mediterranean, and the Black Sea. The European calls for support for the open and free Indo-Pacific and their condemnation of Chinese actions are thus exposed as not entirely credible given their highly constrained naval capacity.¹⁰¹

The Russian federation has closely followed the escalation in the East China Sea. The Russian president says China is fully in its right to push back on the U.S. and its vassals intruding into its rightful sphere of influence. Just like China, Russia is committed to a more multipolar order. Russia sees the ECS conflict as an opportunity to re-start the stalled conflict in Ukraine. Russia boldly launches missile attacks on NATO military equipment arriving in Western Ukraine, while again conducting air exercises near the Baltics and Finland. It is testing the maneuver space of the U.S. and its European counterparts to manage dual crises in two regions simultaneously. In Washington, public defense intellectuals argue that the United States should focus its attention near-exclusively on China since it is the greater threat to U.S. hegemony,

¹⁰⁹ The defense investments announced in 2022 were intended to expand the naval capacity as well as its offensive capabilities. Yet, deliveries have been delayed due to the surge in demand across Europe after the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Ministerie van Defensie, "Defensienota 2022," onderwerp (Ministerie van Defensie, June 1, 2022), <https://www.defensie.nl/onderwerpen/defensienota-2022/lezen>.

¹⁰¹ Paul van Hooft, Benedetta Girardi, and Tim Sweijts, *Guarding the Maritime Commons: What Role for Europe in the Indo-Pacific* (The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2022).
van Hooft, Girardi, and Sweijts.

while Russia is a regional threat the Europeans are equipped to manage.¹⁶² The U.S. president underlines that the U.S. remains committed to both Europe and Asia, but as the ECS conflict intensifies and U.S. naval and air assets are pushed to the Indo-Pacific, such a policy is more difficult to maintain.

Escalation and expansion of the East China Sea conflict: Taiwan

As Chinese vessels face off against American and Japanese vessels, the internal debates within the Chinese leadership move towards even starker choices between accommodation and further escalation. While not planned, hardliners argue that the current conflagration offers the opportunity to escalate towards Taiwan. As China is already in conflict with the U.S., they argue, there is no reason to hold back anymore. The remaining moderates within the Party note the risks of moving on Taiwan; unlike the disputes over the islands in the East China Sea, the U.S. would view Taiwan as an essential interest. The moderates argue vehemently that further escalation would lead to the strongest response from the United States. However, the hardliners counter that the U.S. is constrained in its resources, obligated as it is to shoring up the containment of Russia in Europe. It will not be able to respond fully or quickly over Taiwan. The hardliners win the day. The PLA begins mobilizing forces near the Taiwan Strait, massing its amphibious landing ships, and helicopter carriers. Though the timing was unplanned, the PLA has several plans already prepared for invasion.

The U.S. president is criticized by members of the opposition but also their own party for failing to deter China from moving on Taiwan. In response, they move carrier strike groups toward the Pacific. In line with their existing plans and doctrine,

¹⁶² Elbridge Colby and Oriana Skylar Mastro, "Opinion | Ukraine Is a Distraction From Taiwan," *Wall Street Journal*, February 13, 2022, sec. Opinion, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraine-is-a-distraction-from-taiwan-russia-china-nato-global-powers-military-invasion-jinping-biden-putin-europe-11644781247>.

as described in the previous section, U.S. military planners note that speed is of the essence. With U.S. naval assets limited in the region both in numbers and in terms of their ability to safely navigate the Western Pacific, they quickly target key PLA radar installations and launch sites on the coast near Taiwan. Taiwan uses its new anti-ship cruise missiles to sink Chinese vessels crossing the Strait.

In retaliation for the death of sailors killed by Taiwan and U.S. attacks, the PLA Rocket Artillery Force launches volleys of ballistic missiles at Taiwan and at Kadena airbase in Okinawa. The Pentagon fears that the repairs of air strips and planes damaged in the attack will take too long and considers how to address the emerging conventional imbalance through the threat of limited nuclear strikes against massing Chinese forces. Anticipating the US move, and mindful of the relative vulnerability of its own limited arsenal to a first strike, Beijing puts its nuclear forces on high alert. US officials see a narrowing window of opportunity to stop a cross-Strait war and the conflict in the ECS without moving first.

Conclusions

In the end, scenarios are simply thought experiments; they cannot tell us what will happen, but they allow us to explore the features of the future security environment so we can best prevent what we can and prepare for what cannot. Our scenario suggests four conclusions about chances of and pathways for conflict in the East China Sea.

First, we see long-term structural pressures. Traditional international relations theory and well-established historical cases show that major military powers that are at heightened risk to clash with each other—including the One Hundred Years War, the First World War or the Great Pacific War.¹⁹³ Many of the decisions taken by China, the United States, and others in the region seem to suggest that the region has been locked on course toward a conflict of considerable scale.

Second, we note the possibilities for nationalist-populist rhetoric both creating the impetus for conflict contingencies and then trapping participants into a cycle of escalation. With the still-recent invasion of Ukraine in mind, the power of nationalist and imperialist ideas held by Russian policymakers quickly come to mind. Whether originally instrumental, or in large part instrumental, these ideas now allow the Russian government less space to recalibrate its policies, should it want to avoid the risk of a stab-in-the-back narrative taking hold among even more hardline nationalist forces. Yet, this rhetoric and the concomitant policies promoting ‘jingoist’

¹⁹³ Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 1983); John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (WW Norton & Company, 2001); Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017); Patrick Porter, “Thucydides Lives in Asia: Power Transition Traps Are Real” (The Hague, Netherlands: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2022), <https://hcss.nl/report/guarding-the-commons-thucydides-lives-in-asia/>. Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*; Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*; Allison, *Destined for War*; Porter, “Thucydides Lives in Asia.”

narratives are hard to tone down, create lock in effects, prolong fighting, exacerbate animosity, increase fears of commitment renegeing in case of a cease fire, and thereby narrow the space for solutions aimed at de-escalation.¹⁶⁴

Third, it is surprisingly straightforward to imagine a scenario where large-scale interstate violence erupts between the major powers of the current global system. The East Asian system, maybe even the global system, seems once again primed for the outbreak of conflict despite decades of growing interdependence and deepening institutions. Leaders and publics across Europe and Asia seem to look for any excuse to break away from the so-called rules-based liberal international order while states are adapting their military postures.

Yet, fourth and finally, being asked to consider a conflict scenario prepares intellectuals, leaders, and policymakers for escalatory situations, which may help understand how quickly Chinese, U.S., and Japanese officials react in conflicts. Yet, when we look at the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War, there was widespread disbelief across Europe and even in Ukraine itself in the months leading up to the war that Russia would take the dangerous and costly leap into the unknown. Despite seeming unthinkable merely weeks before, Russia committed to a full-scale invasion on February 24th nonetheless. Neither the eight years of negotiation between Ukraine and Russia from 2014 to 2022, the quiet acquiescence to Russia's annexation of Crimea, nor the deepening energy interdependence between Europe and Russia, prevented the outbreak of war in February 2022. The lack of imagination regarding war, perhaps also borne by the lack of appetite for it, prevented key decision makers in Europe from envisaging the sequence of events, and implementing the appropriate

¹⁶⁴ See Dan Reiter, *How Wars End* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Virginia Page Fortna, "Scraps of Paper? Agreements and the Durability of Peace," *International Organization* 57, no. 02 (2003): 337-72, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818303572046>; Tim Sweijs and Mattia Bertolini, "How Wars End: War Terminations: Insights for the Russia-Ukraine War," May 2022, <https://hcss.nl/report/how-wars-end-russia-ukraine/>.

measures to deal with it. It is precisely for this reason that it is so necessary to imagine the steps that can lead to war in the Indo-Pacific Theatre, thus informing policies that avert tragedy and disaster.

04

Contested Scenarios in the Yellow Sea: U.S.–China Maritime Clashes

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The views expressed here are the author's alone and do not represent the official position of the Navy, the US Department of Defense or the US government.

Introduction

U.S.-Sino relations continue to deteriorate and both sides have labeled the other as their most serious security threat. In the United States, the Biden administration's National Security Strategy notes China "is the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it. Beijing has ambitions to create an enhanced sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and to become the world's leading power."¹ The Pentagon's 2022 National Defense Strategy declares "the most

¹ Joseph R. Biden Jr., "National Security Strategy," October 2022, p. 23. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

comprehensive and serious challenge to U.S. national security is the PRC's (People's Republic of China) coercive and increasingly aggressive endeavor to refashion the Indo-Pacific region and the international system to suit its interests and authoritarian preferences. ... The PRC is therefore the pacing challenge for the Department."²

In turn, China has accused the United States of seeking to contain its rise and of being the gravest threat to world and regional stability.³ Flashpoints include—but are not limited to—trade disputes, Chinese claims in the South China Sea, competition for influence in Oceania, and possible Chinese military operations against Taiwan. An area that has received less attention is the Yellow Sea (in Korea, the West Sea). Washington and Beijing have had no direct encounters in the Yellow Sea region, and the United States is likely to act cautiously in this area given its proximity to China. However, the points of friction and potential for confrontation in the region are growing as the interests of China, North Korea, and South Korea increase and overlap with each other.⁴

In the years ahead, there are several possible paths to conflict in the Yellow Sea region that could disrupt peace and stability. This paper focuses on those that could lead to a direct clash between the United States and China or begin among the other regional players and eventually draws in Washington and Beijing, the latter of which is the more probable path. Conflict is likely to start as a low-level incident or “gray zone” operation that escalates, likely unintentionally, into a more serious military clash.⁵

² US Department of Defense, “2022 National Defense Strategy,” October 27, 2022, p. 4, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>.

³ “Chinese military calls US biggest threat to world peace,” *Associated Press*, September 13, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/china-beijing-us-news-international-news-asia-pacific-9c9cf27d653fccbd34baf23f6ed48661>.

⁴ Formally, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the Republic of Korea (ROK).

⁵ For a more formal discussion of the concept of gray zones, see Andrew S. Erickson (ed.) *Maritime Gray Zone Operations: Challenges and Countermeasures in the Indo-Pacific* (London: Routledge, 2022).

The four scenarios examined in this paper are the following: 1) a North Korean collapse that draws in South Korea, China, and the United States; 2) a serious North Korean provocation, such as a direct ROK-DPRK naval clash or the shelling of a ROK island, similar to the events of 2010, that precipitates a wider conflict between regional actors; 3) a ROK-China confrontation over exclusive economic zone (EEZ) delimitation and fishing rights that escalates into a broader conflict; and 4) a ROK clash with a China-Russia combined air patrol that intrudes into the Korean air defense identification zone (KADIZ) or territorial airspace and escalates. These scenarios are not intended to be precise predications of how conflict might occur and the plausibility of each scenario is open to debate. Indeed, the likelihood of a direct U.S.-China clash in the Yellow Sea is low. However, assessing these possible scenarios identifies several implications for regional security and provides recommendations for the ROK Navy and the Ministry of National Defense (MND) that include: increase ROK maritime domain awareness; settle EEZ claims with China; establish better communication channels for ad hoc responses should North Korea collapse or conduct an aggressive action; plan and prepare for gray zone contingencies with a focus on escalation control; explore ways to expand the ROK-U.S. alliance for greater maritime cooperation; increase ROK-U.S. and international scientific research and cooperation for sustaining the maritime ecosystem; and increase the priority of maritime capability in the ROK defense budget.

The paper will begin with a brief review of the history of conflict in the Yellow Sea and an assessment of the interests and stakes of the key players in the region. Next, the paper will describe the four scenarios, followed by analysis of their chief implications, and will conclude with a set of recommendations for policymakers.

The History of Conflict in the Yellow Sea

Over the past several decades, there have been many instances of conflict in the Yellow Sea. Though the violence has resulted in ships sinking and lives lost, the conflict has not yet escalated to a broader war. These instances have included North Korean abduction of ROK fishermen and clashes between the ROK Coast Guard and Chinese fishing boats operating illegally in South Korean waters. But other examples have been more violent such as the fire fights between the ROK Navy (ROKN) and the Korean People's Navy (KPN) along the Northern Limit Line (NLL), as well as North Korea's artillery barrage of Yeonpyeongdo in 2010. The United States has not been a participant in these clashes to date, however, as a close ROK ally with a desire for regional stability, Washington has been very concerned about these events and their potential for escalation.

Northern Limit Line

For South Korea, the most serious conflict in the region has involved North Korea and the dispute over the NLL. The line was promulgated in August 1953 by the United Nations Command (UNC) after the Korean War armistice negotiations were unable to settle on a maritime boundary. North Korea was not notified of the line but soon surmised its existence. Pyongyang raised no objection to the NLL until 1973 when it declared the line illegitimate and characterized it as an illegal blockade that violated the armistice. Regarding the five Northwest Islands (NWI) that the armistice places under UNC/South Korean jurisdiction, North Korea declared they were located in DPRK territorial waters. Henceforth, the DPRK demanded that South Korea give prior notification and receive permission from North Korea to reach these islands. ROK and

U.S. officials disregarded the North's demands and Pyongyang chose not to enforce its pronouncement. The area along the NLL remained relatively quiet for the next 25 years.

The calm ended in June 1999 when ROKN and KPN vessels clashed for several days along the NLL. The incursions were likely a more direct DPRK challenge to the line's legitimacy. Two KPN vessels were sunk in an exchange that culminated a week of hostilities, but South Korean ships sustained little damage. Following the skirmish, North Korea again declared the NLL a "bogus line" and proposed its own version of the NLL that expanded North Korea's territorial sea but allowed for two corridors, each 2 nm wide, for South Korea to reach the NWIs. Again, North Korea chose not to enforce its revised version of the NLL and tensions eased for a time.

Violence flared again in June 2002 when North Korea provoked a fight along the NLL. KPN forces took another beating with estimates of 30 North Korean sailors killed and an unknown number wounded. Five South Koreans also died in the skirmish, and 19 were wounded. These clashes pointed to significant shortcomings in the KPN's surface fleet, particularly targeting and firing systems that placed its ships at a significant disadvantage in the 1999 and 2002 engagements.

North Korea bided its time until November 2009 when a single KPN vessel clashed with the ROKN along the NLL in the Battle of Daecheong. The outcome was similar to previous engagements with the North Korean ship badly damaged but able to limp back to port. South Korean forces did not pursue and the conflict did not escalate. Though tension levels soon returned to normal, the calm did not last long. On March 26, 2010, the ROK corvette *Cheonan* was sunk off the coast of Baengnyeongdo by a violent explosion that killed 46 sailors and wounded another 58. Initially, the cause of the explosion was uncertain but suspicions quickly turned to North Korea. After an extensive, multilateral investigation that included Australia, South Korea, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States, it was determined that the ship

was sunk by a DPRK torpedo.⁶ Despite the attack being an act of war, the UN Security Council could muster only a muted condemnation through a presidential statement because China and Russia would not support a formal resolution. In fact, China dismissed the multilateral investigation, and Russia launched its own inquiry with results that challenged South Korea's conclusions. The United States and others joined South Korea in condemning Pyongyang, and Seoul cut all economic ties with North Korea except for continued operations at the Kaesong Industrial Complex.

In November, North Korea tested the South again when it called on ROK authorities to cancel the annual Hoguk military exercise. When Seoul refused, North Korean artillery opened fire on the island of Yeonpyeong. South Korea returned fire and when the shelling stopped, two ROK Marines and two civilians were killed on the South Korean side with an unknown number of North Korean casualties. Unlike the *Cheonan*, the perpetrator of the attack was immediately clear. South Korea's patience had worn thin and the ROK military was prepared to retaliate, even escalate in its response. Yet, while South Korean forces were ready to respond, Washington pressed Seoul for restraint, fearing the possibility of a wider war.⁷ In the end, South Korea pulled back but vowed in a public declaration that should North Korea ever initiate another violent act across the NLL, there would be a determined response. Though it is not clear how Pyongyang viewed the South's declaration, given that the NLL has been relatively quiet since November 2010, North Korea is likely to have received the intended deterrence message.

6 "Joint Investigation Report: On the Attack Against ROK Ship Cheonan," Ministry of National Defense, Republic of Korea, September 2010, <http://nautilus.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Cheonan.pdf>.

7 Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Knopf, 2014), p. 497 and Victor Cha, *The Impossible State: North Korea. Past and Future* (London: Bodley Head, 2012), pp. 489-90, note 52.

Illegal Chinese fishing

Another source of conflict in the Yellow Sea has been illegal Chinese fishing. Over the past two decades, Chinese fishing boats have increasingly encroached on Korean waters; a 2018 report noted over 1,000 Chinese fishing boats were chased from South Korean waters that year.⁸ In addition, Chinese Coast Guard and People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) ships have occasionally crossed into ROK territorial waters under the pretense of policing its fishing fleet. When ROK officials have tried to stop the fishing boats, the encounters have occasionally turned violent. In December 2010, two Chinese fishermen died when their boat capsized after striking a ROK Coast Guard cutter and a year later, one ROK Coast Guard crew member was killed and another injured when a Chinese captain stabbed them with a piece of glass while his ship was being boarded. In April 2012, four ROK fishing inspectors were injured trying to board a Chinese vessel that was stopped for illegal fishing. Though these incidences have decreased over the years, the problem remains and in 2021, 108 Chinese fishing boats were seized for fishing illegally or not following the required catch limits.⁹ Fortunately, the matter has not escalated politically or between ships at the scene in recent years.

Abductions

North Korean abductions of ROK fishing boats and their crews have also been a source of conflict in the Yellow Sea region. Since the Korean War, North Korea has abducted almost 4,000 South Koreans, largely fishermen. Most have been returned or

⁸ Wooyoung Lee, "Chinese Vessel Caught Illegally Fishing in South Korea," UPI, November 26, 2018, https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2018/11/26/Chinese-vessel-caught-illegally-fishing-in-South-Korea/7511543215895/.

⁹ *Yonhap News*, "Chinese fishing boat seized for alleged illegal fishing in S. Korean waters," June 12, 2022, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20220612002700325>.

escaped to the South, but several hundred are believed to have never returned.¹⁰ The seizures declined significantly after South Korea increased its maritime presence and capabilities in the 1970s. Policing maritime zones is a difficult challenge, and North Korea likely seized those vessels and their crews as an opportunity to challenge the NLL while discouraging ROK fishing in what the DPRK viewed as its waters.¹¹ The abductions were upsetting to the South Korean population, but they did not escalate to further violence between the two Koreas.

¹⁰ Kim Tong-hyung, "Hope, Anger for S. Koreans Kidnapped by North," *AP News*, May 10, 2018, <https://apnews.com/article/b160eab23bbe4c42a05fae8684366cc2>.

¹¹ See Terence Roehrig, "North Korea: Gray Zone Actions in the Yellow Sea," in Andrew S. Erickson (ed.), *Maritime Gray Zone Operations: Challenges and Countermeasures in the Indo-Pacific* (London: Routledge, 2022), 127-147.

Interests of the Regional Actors

The four countries in this study—South Korea, North Korea, China, and the United States—have numerous competing interests at stake in the region. These interests have varying levels of intensity based on assessments of the stakes involved. This section explores the interests these states have in the Yellow Sea in three broad categories: maritime claims; economics; and security. Though these three will be addressed as discreet sections, they are often linked. Thus, while South Korea and China have unresolved maritime claims, the settlement of these disputes have important implications for economics and security.

Maritime claims.

The maritime boundaries of the Yellow Sea are unsettled and have sometimes been the source of direct military confrontation. The most violent has been the NLL dispute between North and South Korea. Armistice negotiations were unable to settle on a maritime boundary, in large part over disagreement on the designation of territorial seas. North Korea insisted on 12 nm while the UNC maintained 3 nm was the proper marker for these waters. Though 12 nm is today's standard for territorial waters, 3 nm was the accepted limit at the time. In the years since, Pyongyang has declared the line null and void on numerous occasions and has conducted violent grey zone operations to challenge the legitimacy of the line.¹² While North Korea has the right to challenge a line it considers illegitimate, there are diplomatic channels in which the challenge could be made without resorting to violence.

¹² Narushige Michishita, *North Korea Military-Diplomatic Campaigns, 1966-2008* (London: Routledge, 2010), and Roehrig, "North Korea: Gray Zone Actions in the Yellow Sea," 127-147.

Over the years, South Korean officials and legal scholars have argued that North Korea's failure to raise an objection to the NLL for 20 years after its designation indicated Pyongyang's acceptance of the boundary. With no objection forthcoming, the NLL became binding as customary law.¹³ However, it is not clear whether 20 years is an acceptable length of time to establish North Korea's "acquiescence" of the NLL as customary law. ROK administrations have occasionally considered adjusting the NLL in ways that would be more amenable to Pyongyang's objections. However, there has been strong domestic opposition to any change, as the NLL is viewed as the de facto maritime boundary and essential for ROK security.

More benign, but as consequential, are overlapping claims to the 200 nm EEZ in the Yellow Sea between China and South Korea. Two years after the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) came into effect in 1994, both South Korea and China announced their EEZ claims. Given the narrow dimensions of the Yellow Sea, the countries' claims overlap significantly. Despite multiple rounds of talks, a settlement has been elusive because of the distance between their respective positions.¹⁴ South Korea maintains that the UNCLOS principle of a median line that establishes a boundary equidistant from each coastline should be the guide. China, on the other hand, insists that because of its longer coastline, larger population, and extended continental shelf, it is entitled to a proportionally larger share of the overlapping EEZs.

North Korea also shares the problem of unsettled EEZs.¹⁵ Pyongyang claimed

¹³ For a detailed explanation of customary law, see R.R. Churchill and A.V. Lowe, *The Law of the Sea*, 3rd ed. (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1999), 7-8.

¹⁴ Seokwoo Lee and Clive Schofield, "The Law of the Sea and South Korea: the Challenges of Maritime Boundary Delimitation in the Yellow Sea," Maritime Awareness Project, National Bureau of Asian Research, April 23, 2020, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/the-law-of-the-sea-and-south-korea-the-challenges-of-maritime-boundary-delimitation-in-the-yellow-sea/>.

¹⁵ Suk Kyoong Kim, *Maritime Disputes in Northeast Asia: Regional Challenges and Cooperation* (Brill/Nijhoff, 2017), pp. 76-77.

an EEZ that overlaps with those of both China and South Korea. Beijing and Pyongyang have made few attempts to settle the dispute with China maintaining its proportionality argument, but North Korea has held to the UNCLOS median line principle. North and South Korean differences on EEZ delimitation are part of the NLL dispute. The likelihood of concluding any delimitation agreement in the Yellow Sea between the three governments in the near future is very small.

Air Defense Identification Zones (ADIZ) are also a conflict point in the Yellow Sea. While an ADIZ is not technically a maritime issue, they do have implications for the maritime domain. In the 1950s, the United States established an ADIZ for Japan, South Korea, and others in East Asia and eventually turned over administration of the zones to the respective countries.¹⁶ An ADIZ does not have formal standing in international law but is intended to be a buffer between a state's territorial airspace and international airspace that allows for interception of threatening aircraft before reaching the homeland. Planes are typically required to seek prior authorization from the ADIZ state and identify themselves upon entering the zone. Failure to do so is likely to trigger the ADIZ state scrambling jets to intercept and identify the intruding planes while determining if they are a security threat.

In November 2013, China expanded its ADIZ in the East China Sea intending to strengthen its claim over the Diaoyu Islands, which are currently administered by Japan under the name of the Senkaku Islands. Though much of the attention focused on the China-Japan dispute, South Korea was also miffed at Beijing's ADIZ expansion. The larger zone included a disputed reef known to China as Suyan Reef and South Korea as Jeodo. The feature is not an island, as it remains submerged several meters at low tide, but both countries claim administration over the reef. Seoul

¹⁶ Mercedes Trent, "Over the Line: The Implications of China's ADIZ Intrusions in Northeast Asia," *Federation of American Scientists*, January 1, 2020, pp. 9-10.

asserts that Jeodo is 70 nm closer to the nearest South Korean territory (the island of Marado) than any Chinese island and is part of the Korean continental shelf. In 2003, South Korea built the Jeodo Ocean Research Station on the feature to monitor ocean currents and regional weather patterns but China maintains the reef falls within its EEZ and construction should not have occurred until EEZ delimitation was settled. South Korea promptly expanded its ADIZ the following month to include Jeodo.

Economics

The economic interests in the Yellow Sea revolve largely around fishing and access to marine food sources, issues that are closely tied to maritime claims and EEZ delimitation. The Yellow Sea maritime zone is valuable to all in the region for the marine food sources used for both national consumption and export industries. As populations and consumer demand have increased, the dangers of unsustainable harvesting in the Yellow Sea have grown. In particular, as China's coastal waters have been overfished and polluted, its fishing fleets have traveled to more distant seas, often encroaching on the EEZs of both Koreas. The North and South Korean fishing industries have lost billions of dollars in revenue to illegal Chinese fishing and increased efforts to police these waters have added to the costs.

Similarly, the NLL dispute has had implications for fishing rights between North and South Korea. Maritime resources in the area are plentiful and the migration of blue crab through these waters has been a particularly prized catch. Over the years, proposals have surfaced to set up joint fishing areas that straddle the NLL or to extend the NLL south between the NWIs of Seocheongdo and Yeonpyeongdo to provide North Korea with increased access to these resources. Though security concerns have been the dominant issue in the NLL dispute, the economic interests for both countries are considerable as well.

One other important economic interest is transportation costs incurred by North Korea. The Yellow Sea portion of the NLL requires DPRK vessels to traverse in a northwest direction before turning to continue their journey south. In short, the NLL forces North Korean ships to take a longer route, resulting in additional time and fuel that increase the cost of the trip. While North Korea's export economy is hampered by the imposition of UN sanctions and its COVID-19 lockdown, removing the NLL would be an important economic benefit.

Security

The proximity of the Yellow Sea to Beijing and China's heartland makes this maritime region an important security concern for China. With the exception of North Korean nuclear weapon and missile tests that can stir up the regional security environment, Pyongyang poses minimal to threat to Chinese interests. South Korea alone poses no military threat to China but the alliance with the United States and the presence of US forces in the region raises serious concerns for Chinese leaders, especially U.S. naval operations in the Yellow Sea. When South Korea and United States announced exercises in this area following the *Cheonan* sinking in 2010, PLAN Admiral Luo Yuan blasted the plans maintaining that the Yellow Sea was:

... a gateway to China's capital region and a vital passage to the heartland of Beijing and Tianjin. In history, foreign invaders repeatedly took the Yellow Sea as an entrance to enter the heartland of Beijing and Tianjin. The drill area selected by the United States and South Korea is only 500 kilometers away from Beijing. China will be aware of the security pressure from military exercises conducted by any country in an area that is so close to China's heartland.¹⁷

¹⁷ Elisabeth Bumiller and Edward Wong, "China Warily Eyes US-Korea Drills," *New York Times*, July 20, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/21/world/asia/21military.html>.

In contrast, when ROK-U.S. exercises are held in the East Sea, Chinese opposition is far more muted. Thus, despite being international waters, the presence of U.S. and ROK naval forces in the Yellow Sea region is a sensitive issue for Beijing.

China has demonstrated the importance of its security interests in the Yellow Sea in other ways as well. For a number of years, the 124-degree east longitude line in the Yellow Sea has been an informal demarcation between Beijing and Pyongyang for naval operations. PLAN head, Admiral Wu Shengli met South Korea's chief of naval operations, Admiral Choi Yoon-hee, in 2013 and asserted that this line should also be a division for their respective navies concerning responsibilities and operations. The line has no legal status and ROK officials rejected China's suggestion, as the ROK navy needs to operate beyond the 124-degree line to observe North Korean commercial shipping and KPN activities.¹⁸ China has also installed buoys within the disputed EEZ that Beijing maintains are sensors for monitoring ocean currents and weather patterns, but Seoul believes are designed to monitor naval traffic. Most recently, China has stepped up its naval exercises in the Bohai and Yellow Seas, including live fire drills. Taken together, these measures are likely intended to strengthen China's position on future EEZ negotiations and to exert greater overall control of the region.

While the NLL has important economic implications for both North and South Korea, its effect on security is paramount. For South Korea, the NLL helps to constrain the area where the KPN can operate making its activities easier to monitor and increasing the effectiveness of ROK intelligence-gathering operations providing maximum warning time for any DPRK naval actions. In the past, the NLL has been an active area of DPRK gray zone operations, including the delivery of special operations forces, a task that would be easier for North Korea if the line was farther south.

¹⁸ Yeong Yong-su, "China Tried Muscling South Korea in the Yellow Sea," JoongAng Daily, November 30, 2013, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2013/11/29/politics/China-tried-muscling-South-Korea-in-Yellow-Sea/2981288.html>.

Additionally, the five NWIs would be very difficult for the ROKN to defend without the NLL. Conversely, many of these security concerns are viewed in reverse by North Korea. Moving the NLL would push ROKN vessels farther from its shores, providing a larger maritime buffer and a wider area for the DPRK's naval operations while increasing its warning time for South Korean actions. For national security reasons, South Korea will not adjust the NLL until North-South relations and the overall security environment improves.

Another growing concern, though not in the West Sea, has been Chinese-Russian joint air operations that have crossed into the KADIZ as well as the territorial airspace over Dokdo, which is called Takeshima by Japan, which also claims the islets. The first joint air patrol occurred in July 2019 when Russian and Chinese bombers accompanied by a Russian A-50 airborne early warning and control aircraft crossed into the KADIZ as it traveled through the East China Sea and into the East Sea. South Korea scrambled fighters to intercept the planes. Later, the Russian A-50 broke off and flew into Dokdo's territorial airspace. ROK fighters fired flares along with over 300 rounds as warning shots before the A-50 departed. South Korea protested the incursion into its airspace surrounding Dokdo, and Japan also objected to the Chinese-Russian operation and Korea's response, as both occurred in what Japan viewed as its territorial airspace surrounding Takeshima. No doubt, Beijing and Moscow knew this action would exacerbate tensions between Seoul and Tokyo, a relationship already fraught with problems. An increasingly assertive China-Russian partnership that has grown since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 could cause problems in the region for South Korea.

U.S. Interests in the Yellow Sea

The United States is the only country of the four in this study that is not part of the region. As a result, its interests and the stakes of these interests are markedly different from China and the two Koreas. The United States has little at stake in the maritime disputes in the region, though Washington would be a strong supporter of settling any dispute peacefully and in accordance with international law. U.S. security and economics are also not directly affected by the events in the Yellow Sea region. Yet, the United States does have two interconnected interests in play: South Korean security and regional stability.

As a long-time ally of South Korea, the United States has demonstrated its commitment to the ROK's security through a formal security treaty, economic and military aid during the early years of the alliance, deployment of U.S. combat troops to the peninsula, and the inclusion of South Korea under the U.S. nuclear umbrella.¹⁹ Though a ground-based conflict has been the primary concern for the alliance, maritime challenges, particularly along the NLL, and ROK security writ large are also key interests.

Conflict in the Yellow Sea would also have a negative impact on the broader Northeast Asia security environment, affecting U.S. allies South Korea and Japan and disrupting economic activities and supply chain flows. Yet, while Washington has been steadfast in its commitment to South Korean security, it has also been very cautious in taking actions that might escalate a conflict on the peninsula, not only for its impact on Korea but also for its potential effect on regional stability.

¹⁹ Terence Roehrig, "The U.S. Nuclear Umbrella over South Korea: Nuclear Weapons and Extended Deterrence," *Political Science Quarterly* 132:4 (Winter 2017-18): 650-681.

Conflict Scenarios

The history and interests in the Yellow Sea region provide the backdrop for several possible points of friction that could lead to a direct clash of U.S. and Chinese forces. Reviewed here are four possible scenarios that could lead to conflict between the United States and China in the region.

Scenario 1 - A North Korean Collapse

Since the end of the Cold War, scholars and analysts have been predicting the demise of the North Korean regime. Potential causes, such as the unsustainability of the DPRK's economic model or possible political unrest—either a mass uprising from below or an elite-level coup from above—are often named as possible paths to the disintegration of the North Korean state. Though Pyongyang has shown a remarkable ability to survive in extreme conditions, this scenario posits a North Korean collapse due to economic or political causes that lead to chaos, instability, and violence occurring either rapidly or as a lengthy struggle between rival groups. In either case, the outcome leads to a collapse of central authority and the absence of order and stability in North Korea. While the end of the DPRK is a welcome outcome in many respects, the bedlam that would result raises a strong possibility of a direct military clash between U.S., Chinese, and South Korean forces trying to bring order to the situation.

As the world watches North Korea descend into anarchy, China, South Korea, and the United States will have several serious concerns for how this crisis might evolve. At the top of the list is worry for the security of North Korea's nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons programs. All three countries are likely to have

grave fears that in the pandemonium of a collapse, North Korean leaders might lash out with weapons of mass destruction in a fit of panic or as a way to stave off outside intervention. It is also possible that a faction of the KPA might threaten to use nuclear weapons, perhaps in hopes of catalyzing Chinese intervention to save the regime. As the DPRK government disintegrates, command and control of nuclear material may wane, allowing fissile material and technology to disappear and be sold to other entities. As a result, Chinese, South Korean, and U.S. military forces would race to secure the North's nuclear facilities.²⁹ These units could flow into the North from multiple directions, including from routes in the Yellow Sea leading to a possible confrontation between the naval forces of all three states.

There is another motive for intervention that could lead to a clash between Chinese and U.S. forces. The collapse of North Korea would have important political and security ramifications for China, as the likely result would be a unified Korea under Seoul's control. Though Beijing is reluctant to voice this view publicly, it would prefer to see the peninsula remain divided to maintain North Korea as a buffer state, ensuring that U.S. forces and intelligence gathering capabilities in a unified Korea do not come closer to the Chinese border and preventing the increased economic strength of a single Korea that would compete with China. Consequently, Beijing will actively support whichever remnant of the DPRK regime is believed to be most supportive of Chinese interests and whose strength make them likely to emerge the victor.

In the early stages of a collapse that portended the end of the DPRK, particularly if it were less violent, South Korean forces might move into the North to bring a degree of stability, address any humanitarian concerns resulting from

²⁹ Oriana Mastro, "Conflict and Chaos on the Korean Peninsula: Can China's Military Help Secure North Korea's Nuclear Weapons?" *International Security* 43:2 (Fall 2018): 84-116.

internal strife, and begin preparations for reunification. These efforts would likely receive assistance from the United States, particularly the U.S. Navy through platforms off North Korea's Yellow Sea coast. These efforts might be similar to a major humanitarian assistance or disaster relief operation. If China were determined to thwart these efforts to maintain a divided Korea, there is a possibility that PLAN responses would lead to direct engagement with South Korean and U.S. naval forces in the Yellow Sea along with clashes on the peninsula with PLA units directly or from engagements with KPA forces supported by the PLA.

Scenario 2 - A North Korea Provocation

In 2010, violence in the Yellow Sea along the NLL escalated when a North Korean submarine torpedoed the ROKN *Cheonan* in March and in November, DPRK artillery shelled Yeonpyeongdo. South Korea did not respond with military force, in large measure because of U.S. pressure for restraint. However, South Korea made clear that next time, there would be a response.

In this scenario, North Korean nuclear weapon capabilities have continued to grow, and Pyongyang is confident that these weapons provide an important advantage in its struggle with the South. In line with the concept of the "stability-instability paradox," North Korea believes that it can pursue a more aggressive approach in inter-Korean relations since nuclear weapons will protect the regime from escalation that might endanger Kim family rule.²¹ As a result, North Korea would begin a slow campaign of gray zone operations that are increasingly bold and lead to clashes along the NLL, like those in 2010, in which lives are lost on both sides. North

²¹ Terence Roehrig, "North Korea, Nuclear Weapons, and the Stability-Instability Paradox," *Korea Journal of Defense Analysis* 28:2 (June 2016): 181-198.

Korean actions could include an overt or covert naval confrontation along the NLL that probes the response of the ROK Navy perhaps by occupying a disputed island such as a repeat of its actions regarding Hambak-do.

South Korea would need to weigh its response options carefully; a forceful reply would signal that North Korea's actions would not be tolerated, despite its nuclear status. However, officials also need to consider the dangers of starting an escalation spiral that could lead to greater violence, particularly if North Korea was to perceive that the survival of the regime was at stake. Thus, proper signaling and proportionality as well as thorough risk evaluation would be crucial. South Korea's response could include U.S. support, depending on the circumstances. Should China become involved on North Korea's side of the conflict and the violence escalates, the possibility of a U.S.-China clash would increase.

Another version of this scenario would also follow the aftermath of a North Korean maritime provocation along the NLL. In the wake of this action, South Korea and the United States decide against retaliation, but instead conduct a major naval exercise in the Yellow Sea to communicate to Pyongyang it must cease its gray zone activities. The U.S. flotilla might include the carrier strike group based in Japan or be composed of other naval assets in the region. The presence of a large U.S. naval contingent would be viewed in Beijing as an aggressive act, particularly if U.S.-China relations continue to deteriorate from their present status. The PLAN is likely to deploy a force to the vicinity of the exercises to signal its displeasure, observe, and ensure the ROK-U.S. exercises remain within certain limits. With a significant number of naval assets in this area, the possibilities of an accident or an unintentional clash increase that could spark a more serious conflict.

Scenario 3 – South Korea-China Clash in the Yellow Sea

Despite many rounds of talks, South Korea and China have been unable to settle their overlapping EEZ claims in the Yellow Sea. In the past, they have managed the dispute through fishing agreements that set catch limits and committed both sides to cooperate in enforcing these measures. Moreover, China has maintained a low-key approach to the Yellow Sea that has differed from its posture in the East and South China Seas to lessen friction between Beijing and Seoul.²² However, Chinese vessels continue to fish illegally in ROK waters.

If ROK-China negotiations break down and Beijing begins to take a more confrontational approach with South Korea on Yellow Sea matters, China's actions in the Yellow Sea would more closely mirror its posture in the East and South China Seas. As a result, Chinese fishing boats become bolder in their disregard of fishing agreements. In turn, the ROK Coast Guard, supported by the ROK Navy, will crack down on Chinese activities and will take more vessels and fishing crews into custody. In turn, there will be a significant increase in the level of Chinese resistance and violence in these interactions.

As tensions rise, domestic pressure mounts on the Chinese government to do more to protect its fishing fleet from what Chinese media portray as overzealous ROK policing. Moreover, the Chinese government recognizes its inability to break the South Korea-U.S. alliance and decides it is time to teach Seoul a lesson. As a show of force, Beijing sends several PLAN warships to areas adjacent to the NLL but outside ROK territorial waters and after receiving permission, moves some of its vessels to the North Korean side of the NLL. The presence of these ships is justified as a port visit or naval exercise with the North and is also a signal of increased Sino-DPRK naval

²² Shuxian Luo, "China-South Korea Disputes in the Yellow Sea: Why a More Conciliatory Chinese Posture," *Journal of Contemporary China*, January 30, 2022, pp. 1-18.

cooperation. As tensions escalate, South Korea requests support from the U.S. Navy who responds by sending two or three destroyers to the area as a show of support and to assist ROK maritime forces in their operations, though U.S. vessels remain well south of the NLL.

In the course of routine operations, a small PLAN vessel passes dangerously close to a U.S. destroyer forcing it to make a sudden and dangerous evasive maneuver to avoid a collision. The Chinese vessels continue to harass the U.S. ships and are now joined by Chinese drones launched from a PLAN cruiser. In addition, maritime militia boats within the Chinese fishing fleet harass U.S. ships. In the midst of this chaos, one of the Chinese drones collides with a U.S. vessel or some other hostile act occurs forcing the U.S. ships to defend themselves, resulting in shots fired.

Scenario 4 - Responding to a Joint China-Russia Air Patrol

For the past several years, China and Russia have increased their military cooperation. Drawn together by their common interest in opposing the United States and the fallout from the war in Ukraine, Moscow and Beijing have increased the number and sophistication of their military exercises. Joint operations have expanded to include land, air, and sea exercises, including in the waters and airspace around the Korean Peninsula. These actions regularly cross the KADIZ and have continued to make occasional forays into the airspace surrounding Dokdo. ROK fighters have scrambled to intercept these exercises and so far, the Chinese and Russian aircraft have departed the KADIZ without incident.

As time passes, South Korea's relations with China and Russia deteriorate. Political rhetoric becomes more confrontational and Beijing and Moscow become more brazen in their joint operations that intrude on the KADIZ and start to take

place regularly in the Yellow Sea. Tensions come to a head when during one of the incursions, when Chinese fighters escorting the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) bombers break formation and decide to confront the ROK planes sent to track maneuvers leading to two planes colliding. This event would be reminiscent of the 2001 EP-3 incident, in which a Chinese plane brushed a U.S. surveillance aircraft and crashed. ROK fighters respond by firing warning shots that accidentally hit two Chinese planes. Though the remaining aircraft disengage and the situation does not immediately escalate, Seoul requests U.S. assistance for future operations, increasing the probability of an unintentional clash between U.S. and Chinese forces.

Implications and Recommendations

These scenarios raise some serious concerns for the future of security in the Yellow Sea. Important interests are at stake and numerous points of friction are present in the region. Most concerning would be a Chinese decision to become more assertive and adopt a strategy that aggressively pushes its policy positions, particularly concerning maritime zones, that differ from South Korea's. China may also become less amenable to fishing agreements that manage the conduct of its fishing fleet because of increasing domestic pressure. China's maritime militia might also join the fishing fleet to push back against ROK enforcement of fishing agreements. South Korean hope for an equitable EEZ delimitation agreement would be gone and the PLAN could increase its presence and posture in the area. This change could be linked with even closer cooperation with Russia, such as increased air and naval exercises as well as greater political and economic collaboration. Chinese and Russian ties with North Korea might also increase, possibly emboldening Pyongyang in its behavior. However North Korea can be as much a liability for China and Russia as an asset, so it is unclear how much energy will be devoted to building some type of trilateral arrangement.

Another possibility is a more assertive North Korea that steps up its gray zone activities along the NLL. In many respects, the gray zone operations are more likely and are a more challenging security problem for South Korea to deter than North Korean use of nuclear weapons. However, the extent to which Pyongyang views its nuclear capability through the lens of the stability-instability paradox remains to be seen. It is unclear whether North Korea believes that its nuclear capability provides a shield to conduct increased lower-level actions with less fear of retaliation given that they operate under its "nuclear shadow."

While there may be an increased chance of conflict in the Yellow Sea area as a whole, the likelihood of a direct China-U.S. clash is much less plausible. The United States will support its ally, South Korea and uphold its security commitment in a contingency involving North Korea. Washington will also be involved politically and diplomatically over issues that arise in the Yellow Sea. However, a direct U.S.-China naval clash in the Yellow Sea is unlikely for two main reasons. First, the United States has been hesitant to operate in the Yellow Sea in the past given its sensitivity to Chinese security. Depending on the circumstances, Washington may be reluctant to utilize the U.S. Navy in a way that is viewed as overly provocative. However, it would depend on the nature of Chinese actions.

Second, if the U.S. Navy were to operate in the Yellow Sea, it would likely have a very restrictive set of rules of engagement that would preclude an early, or first, use of force. A direct military engagement, either accidental or intentional, would likely be the result of Chinese actions. U.S. forces would aim to avoid conflict and remain in a defensive posture without being pushed out of the area of operations. It is also likely that both Washington and Beijing will be reluctant to intentionally engage in a major row in the Yellow Sea and would seek to deescalate the conflict. In short, a direct naval clash between the United States and China is much more likely in other maritime regions such as the East or South China Seas than in the Yellow Sea.

However, the likelihood and implications of these scenarios point to some important recommendations for South Korea and the ROK Navy.

- Information is a crucial starting point. It is impossible to respond properly without timely and accurate knowledge of what is happening in maritime zones. Consequently, it will be important to examine the state of South Korea's maritime domain awareness (MDA) and the assets available to improve its MDA. Increased funding may be necessary to grow the

number and capability of maritime-based sensors in the region.

- Without sacrificing core elements of South Korea's position on its EEZ claims, the ROK government should ramp up efforts to conclude an EEZ delimitation agreement with China. Sino-Korean relations are relatively stable at the moment and ties are unlikely to improve significantly in the future, along with a strong possibility they might deteriorate further. There may be no better time than the present for a concerted effort to reach agreement. In addition, an agreement will provide an important baseline and validation rooted in international law for South Korea to resist future Chinese actions in the region.
- One of the more likely and serious possibilities for regional conflict is a political or economic collapse of North Korea. Depending on how events transpire, there is a strong possibility that ROK, U.S., and Chinese forces come in contact and increase the chances of a military clash. Though likely to be inadvertent, the danger of violence on the Korean Peninsula and in the Yellow Sea is significant. Ideally, advance contingency planning between the United States, South Korea, China, and perhaps Russia, would lessen risks of violence. However, there are political reasons why such planning is unlikely to occur. Instead, these countries should prepare communication channels to connect with each other that could be quickly activated if the DPRK is on the brink of collapse. Thus, since planning in advance will be difficult, mechanisms will need to be established as quickly as possible once events demonstrate the need for immediate communication.
- The ROK-U.S. alliance and the U.S. commitment to South Korean security has been largely ground-centric. Yet, security in Korea is changing with an increasing number of concerns in the maritime domain, not only regarding the DPRK but also in the broader security environment. Consequently, the United States and South Korea may need to expand the maritime dimensions of the alliance. Some potential options include increasing the number and scope of ROK-U.S. naval exercises, more frequent U.S. port visits, and possibly homeporting U.S. vessels at ROK naval bases similar to U.S. arrangements with Japan. A more robust U.S. naval presence would also help to bolster deterrence by providing another visible indicator of the U.S. security guarantee to South Korea. This will

be particularly important in addressing a more nuclear-capable North Korea that may be willing to ratchet up its gray zone operations. Increased coast guard cooperation along with expanded scientific research endeavors between civilian institutes and universities on issues such as sustainable fishing stocks and ocean pollution are additional avenues for ROK-U.S. cooperation. Specifically, reenergizing the Jeodo Ocean Research Station as an international research platform would have important scientific benefits while also helping to affirm South Korea's administration of this area.

- The growth of challenges in the maritime domain will require South Korea to make some difficult resource decisions in the years ahead. The ROK Navy has three zones of defense responsibility—coastal, regional and global—each with different needs. To increase the effectiveness of the ROKN to support the missions in all three of these zones, the share of the defense budget devoted to these efforts will need to be increased.

05

Conclusion: Wargaming and Policy Making: The Benefits of Studying China-U.S. Conflict at Sea Scenarios

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Informed scenarios are useful to both militaries and policy makers because they enable deterrence, conflict avoidance, and the advancement of national and shared interests. As noted in the introduction, “a scenario is an illustration of a likely pathway to conflict and of the dynamics of war aimed at drawing out policy implications through imaginative process of multiple alternatives.” The scenarios presented here are well-informed and therefore particularly useful to Japan, Taiwan, the United States, and the Republic of Korea. Discussion on maritime focused scenarios like those here are particularly important because the Indo-Pacific region is a maritime theater and, as noted in the introduction, the most likely place for conflict in the region to occur is at sea. As China has developed and turned to the sea, it has become increasingly aggressive and is expanding its influence across the entire region. Each of the maritime scenarios presented in this report is unique and presents insight and lessons which can be applied to policy discussions and contingency planning.

East China Sea

The East China Sea scenario identifies two determinant elements of conflict—structural differences and geography. Both are at play in this scenario as China’s claims to Japan’s Senkaku Islands (Diaoyu Islands to China) are based in historical issues and China’s desire to establish a hierarchical order within its sphere of influence. The United States, Japan, and other states are structurally opposed to this claim as status-quo powers that follow the rule of law and aim to uphold the rules-based international order. As a revisionist power seeking to upend the rules-based order and establish a hierarchy in the Indo-Pacific, China seeks to become a maritime great power.¹ To do so, China believes it must control the seas firstly within the First Island Chain and then outward. China sees itself as being hemmed in by the geography of the First Island Chain.² As such, breaking the chain would enable China to project power into the wider Indo-Pacific region. Moreover, as pointed out in the scenario, most of China’s largest trade ports are in the East China Sea, adding an important economic dimension to China’s ambitions.

Establishing control over Taiwan, part of the First Island Chain and linking the East China Sea and South China Sea, simultaneously enables China to expand state power and to resolve its longstanding dispute with the self-governing landmass while also cutting through the island chain. The physical proximity of the Senkaku Islands, controlled by Japan, means that controlling those islands would also be beneficial to China’s power projection in the Indo-Pacific.

1 Liza Tobin, “Wind in the Sails: China Accelerates its Maritime Strategy,” *War on the Rocks*, May 9, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/05/wind-in-the-sails-china-accelerates-its-maritime-strategy/>.

2 Beatrice Heuser and Paul O’Neill, “Episode 5: Admiral Liu Huaqing and China’s Island Chain Strategy,” *RUSI Talking Strategy Podcasts*, August 9, 2022, <https://rusi.org/podcasts/talking-strategy/episode-5-admiral-liu-huaqing-and-chinas-island-chain-strategy>.

The second East China Sea scenario notes that while the United States maintains a policy of strategic ambiguity toward defending Taiwan, the United States is unambiguously committed to defending the Senkaku Islands.³ As a result, the East China Sea being a volatile flashpoint between China and the United States, and it may be that the Senkaku Islands serve as the proximate cause of conflict between the two regional hegemonies if they turn to the use of force to resolve their structural differences.

As it is currently developing, China is effectively using the so-called gray zone tactics to slowly erode the status quo in the East China Sea, seeking to normalize its presence and wear down the Japanese Self Defense Force and the Japanese Coast Guard. China also intends to produce a rift in the Japan-U.S. alliance and hinder its command and control arrangements,⁴ and in concert with other instruments of power, slowly enable it to eventually seize control of this critical region by breaking the island chain beginning with the Senkaku Islands. This scenario presents unique challenges to those producing wargames and policy because of the geopolitical implications and methods being employed, what is at stake, and the context of this scenario within the complex strategic fabric of the region.

³ *The Senkaku Islands: Seeking Maritime Peace Based on the Rule of Law, Not Force or Coercion*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan website: https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/c_m/senkaku/page1we_000012.html.

⁴ John Hemmings and Wade Turvold, "U.S. Command and Control Across the Spectrum of Gray-Zone Operations in the East China Sea," in Jonathan W. Greenert, ed., *Murky Waters in the East China Sea: Chinese Gray-Zone Operations and U.S.-Japan Alliance Coordination*, National Bureau of Asian Research Special Report #90, May 25, 2021, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/murky-waters-in-the-east-china-sea-chinese-gray-zone-operations-and-u-s-japan-alliance-cooperation/>.

West Sea

The West Sea is a relatively secluded geographic maritime region north of the East China Sea that is largely surrounded by China and the Korean peninsula. The scenario presents four possible ways in which conflict could occur in this region. Two of the possibilities involve North Korea as the antagonist and two involve China as the antagonist. All of them feature the Republic of Korea as central to potential conflict, which makes this scenario critical for military wargaming and planning, and to policy makers in both South Korea and the United States as alliance partners. The scenarios highlight that the states bordering the West Sea, as well as the United States, have important interests in the region, ranging from defensive geographic positions, access to the sea, and global supply chains that pass through these waters.

As noted in the scenario, the geographic proximity of the West Sea to the Chinese heartland and capital would seem to make this sea particularly susceptible to geopolitical tension involving China, and yet it is not seemingly as volatile as the East China Sea and South China Sea. In fact, the overlapping Exclusive Economic Zone claims by South Korea and China have not resulted in high-profile conflicts that similar disputed claims in the South China Sea have generated. In part, as was pointed out, this is due to less significant U.S. Navy presence in the West Sea as compared with the others, as the United States desires to moderate its impact commensurate with its limited interests there. South Korea also manages to balance its economic relationship with China in the West Sea even while maintaining security ties with the United States. Economic interests are another source of potential conflict in the West Sea, particularly over illegal fishing by China in the waters of both North and South Korea, with enforcement historically resulting in loss of life. Again, the tension has not escalated to outright conflict. China's recognition that South Korea is making an

effort to maintain peace in the West Sea seems to placate Beijing in this particular region.⁵ The consideration of North Korea's interests in the West Sea add to the scenario's complexity.

The Northern Limit Line poses a maritime constraint to North Korea in the West Sea in the same way that China may feel constrained by the First Island Chain in the East China Sea. But even though it has resulted in skirmishes and death in the past, the West Sea dispute has not evolved as a global flashpoint in the way that the other seas of the region have done so. Even after North Korea sank the Republic of Korea's warship *Cheonan* and used artillery fire against Yeonpyeong Island, the violence did not escalate into a more dangerous conflict.

The West Sea scenario provides an example of how security professionals, to include military planners and war gamers, as well as policy makers, can understand subregional dynamics and prevent strategic competition from becoming conflict.

⁵ Sungmin Cho, "China's Quiet Challenges at Sea: Explaining China's Maritime Activities in the Yellow Sea, 2010-2020," *Asian Security* Vol. 17, No. 3, June 3, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2021.1929928>.

South China Sea

Activity in the South China Sea has garnered much international attention, and for good reason. Political tensions there fueled by China's unlawful claims to control international waters, the building and militarizing of artificial islands, and bullying behavior to prevent Southeast Asian states from fishing and exploring for hydrocarbons within their claimed Exclusive Economic Zones have created a cauldron of clashing powers and principles.⁶ Nowhere is China's desire to become a great maritime power more evident than in the South China Sea, and its neighboring states have largely chosen to hedge, maintaining as much political freedom of maneuver as possible while still placating the competing superpowers of the U.S. and China. In this way, the South China Sea, along with much of Southeast Asia, is in the geographic center between East and South Asia, the Indian and Pacific Oceans, as well as between the competing powers.

The scenarios presented in this chapter are entirely realistic and point to ways in which China is already using gray zone behavior to advance its interests without provoking a kinetic response. The scenario astutely and counterintuitively judges that direct China-U.S. confrontation likely would not lead to conflict, but that conflict between their allies likely would. This keen observation can guide Southeast Asian states' responses to the aggressive behavior of China's maritime militia, Coast Guard, and Navy as they attempt to restrict regional fishing, prevent energy exploration, and enforce unlawful claims to islands, features, and water space. Considering this will enable them to avoid superpower conflict in which the states of the region would suffer collaterally.

⁶ Robert D. Kaplan, *Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific* (New York: Random House, 2014), 1-31.

The third South China Sea scenario presented a China-U.S. clash over Taiwan, which would include implications in both the East and South China Seas. Because Taiwan is a core interest of China, a China-U.S. conflict over Taiwan in the South China Sea could be particularly destructive. Not overtly stated in the scenario was that the reason for the clash is because the United States sees the right of the citizens of a self-governing, democratic Taiwan to self-determination as a vital interest, as many U.S. allies and partners see it the same way. It is for this reason that the scenario analysis shows that U.S. allies moderating their behavior toward Taiwan may simply enable China's continuing provocations rather than preventing them.

This scenario yielded another key observation in that conflict in the South China Sea would have a detrimental effect on global supply chains, as one-third of global trade passes through those waters.⁷ The COVID-19 pandemic showed the fragility of global supply chains, and military planners and policy makers must be cognizant of their responsibilities to protect their national economies from the challenges presented in this scenario.

⁷ "China's Ambitions in the South China Sea," *Association of Accredited Public Policy Advocates to the European Union* website, August 3, 2021, <http://www.aalep.eu/china%E2%80%99s-ambitions-south-china-sea>.

Taiwan Strait

Although Taiwan is not discussed in the policy report as a separate chapter, the Taiwan case is perhaps both the most likely and most dangerous scenario that has the potential of escalating into maritime conflict at sea. The Taiwan Strait, which links the East China Sea and South China Sea, is a strategic waterway 180 kilometers wide that separates the People's Republic of China from the island of Taiwan. The Chinese Communist Party claims that it must reunify Taiwan with mainland China even though the Chinese Communist Party has never governed Taiwan. But China's quest to exert political control over Taiwan constitutes perhaps the most dangerous global flashpoint in the present. The United States, and increasingly its allies and likeminded partners, clash with China over its behavior toward Taiwan.

As is the case in the East China Sea scenario, this clash reveals the structural differences between China and the United States. A rising China sees it within its right to establish a regional hierarchy with itself at the top, promoting its model of socialist autocratic governance. Contrasting this are the democratic states of the region that value human rights and promote the rules-based international order and a free and open Indo-Pacific wherein states have the right to choose their destinies. At the center of this debate is the condition of the seas of the region, as they are currently freely navigable and largely defended by the United States and its allies and partners. Similar to its South China Sea claims, China also claims the Taiwan Strait.

On June 13, 2022, China declared, in contravention of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), that the Taiwan Strait was not international waters but "are China's internal waters, territorial sea, contiguous zone

and exclusive economic zone in that order.”⁸ The United States quickly responded: “The Taiwan Strait is an international waterway, meaning that the Taiwan Strait is an area where high seas freedoms, including freedom of navigation and overflight, are guaranteed under international law.”⁹ Much is at stake in this clash.

During World War Two, U.S. Navy Admiral Ernest King described Taiwan as “the cork in the bottle”¹⁰ of East Asia, meaning that the economies of Japan and South Korea are wholly dependent on trade by sea. According to the World Bank, 79.77 percent of South Korea’s Gross Domestic product is derived from trade,¹¹ almost all of it conducted by sea. South Korea’s economy would be extremely vulnerable should China control the sea lines of communication astride Taiwan.

As noted in the East China Sea scenario, the geography of the island chains plays into China’s thinking on Taiwan. As American author Robert D. Kaplan observed: “If China succeeds in … consolidating Taiwan, not only will its navy be in an advantageous strategic position vis-à-vis the first island chain, but … its national energies … will be just as dramatically freed up to look outward in terms of power projection, to a degree that has so far been impossible.”¹²

The United States went to war to protect democracies in South Korea and Vietnam. Justification of those wars was based in thinking that all regional democracies would fall like dominoes if any one of them fell. Should Taiwan fall, it is possible that China would then endanger other democracies of East Asia,

⁸ Jill Goldenziel, “China Claims to Own the Taiwan Strait. That’s Illegal,” *Forbes*, June 28, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jillgoldenziel/2022/06/28/china-claims-to-own-the-taiwan-strait-thats-illegal/?sh=f0a6f379ba26>.

⁹ David Brunnstrom, Humeyra Pamuk, and Michael Martina, “U.S. Rebuffs China by Calling Taiwan Strait an International Waterway,” *Reuters*, June 14, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/us-rebuffs-china-by-calling-taiwan-strait-an-international-waterway-2022-06-15/>.

¹⁰ Admiral Gary Roughead, “Taiwan: Time for a Real Discussion,” *Hoover Institution*, June 30, 2021, <https://www.hoover.org/research/taiwan-time-real-discussion>.

¹¹ Trade (% of GDP), *The World Bank* website, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NE.TRD.GNFS.ZS?locations=KR>.

¹² Robert D. Kaplan, *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power* (New York: Random House, 2011) 285.

specifically Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea, all of them treaty allies of the United States. As stated by U.S. Senator John Cornyn, “We shouldn't view Taiwan as the CCP's ultimate goal but as the first domino in a quest to reach regional and global dominance. If Taiwan falls, it will not be the end, but rather a beginning.”¹³

In fact, the domino theory regarding Taiwan had a recent European antecedent when autocratic Russia invaded democratic Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The parallels exist between the two scenarios, one real and one as yet abstract, and both China and Taiwan, as well as their supporters, are learning much from the Ukraine conflict. Whichever side learns best will likely be victorious in future conflict. And in this way, informed scenarios can engender learning and are therefore both useful and necessary in preparing for conflict. These scenarios then become very important as Taiwan, and its democratic neighbors in East Asia, are vulnerable.

¹³ John Feng, “John Cornyn Warns Taiwan is 'First Domino' in China's Quest for Global Dominance,” *Newsweek*, November 17, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/senator-john-cornyn-warns-taiwan-first-domino-china-quest-global-dominance-1650096>.

Scenarios, War Games, and Policy Makers

The four maritime scenarios presented in this study are critical for military leaders conducting war games and policy makers alike to understand. War games and exercises based in credible scenarios, like those here, enable competent military planning, development of proper doctrines, and acquisition of the proper resources necessary for operational success. Scenarios also enable policy makers to understand the strategic implications of strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific, rightly characterized as maritime in nature, global in impact, and devastating in outcome.

But there is more to scenarios than military and policy preparation. Preparation, when understood by the adversary, is at the heart of deterrence by denial. If China understands that the United States and its partners are well prepared and assured of military victory, this has a deterrent effect on China's ambitions to undertake military adventures because China knows it will be defeated. Informed scenarios are therefore the critical first element in preventing strategic competition from becoming conflict as they enable proper military war gaming and preparation, and conflict avoidance. This is vitally important, but it is also about the survival of the principles that we hold, including freedom, democracy, the rule of law, and the free and open Indo-Pacific concept, and enables the advancement of shared interests derived from these values, preserving our way of life.

The views expressed in this article are the author's alone, and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies or the United States Government.

Introduction

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Conclusion

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