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## GETTING SERIOUS ABOUT STRATEGY IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

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*Hal Brands and Zack Cooper*

America is suffering from a strategy deficit in the South China Sea. For nearly a decade—and at accelerated speed since 2014—Beijing has been salami slicing its way to a position of primacy in that critical international waterway, while eroding the norms and interests Washington long has sought to defend. To date, however, Washington has struggled to articulate an effective response. The Obama administration opposed Chinese maritime expansion rhetorically and worked to improve the overall American military and geopolitical posture in the Asia-Pacific. Yet the administration only occasionally mustered the leverage necessary to check China's quest for dominance of the South China Sea, and often it was unable even to impose substantial long-term costs on Beijing for its short-term assertiveness. For its part, the Trump administration has yet to formulate or implement a coherent South China Sea strategy, and it has swung from suggesting that America might deny Chinese access to islands in the South China Sea physically—something approaching an act of war—to appearing subsequently to deprioritize the issue.

Today, the situation in the South China Sea is reaching a critical stage as Chinese advances accumulate, America's room for maneuver diminishes, and observers throughout the region wonder whether the United States is up to the challenge. And yet Washington still is searching for a strategy.

Part of the trouble, no doubt, lies in the sheer difficulty of meeting a calculated Chinese offensive that is simultaneously audacious and subtle, one that is changing the geopolitical status quo profoundly but incrementally, in ways designed not to provoke a decisive response. Yet getting America's South China Sea strategy right also requires thinking more-systematically about what Washington

should seek to achieve and what it should hazard in the effort. It has become common, in recent years, to hear calls for the United States to get tough with China over its illegal island building, militarization of disputed features, and coercion of U.S. allies and partners.<sup>1</sup> Yet it is far less common to hear in-depth discussion of what the long-term goal of such a program should be, whether that goal is actually achievable, and how much cost and risk the United States should accept along the way.<sup>2</sup> This is dangerous, because it increases the possibility that America may commit itself to goals that cannot be obtained at a reasonable price, or simply may follow a muddled, confused policy on a crucial geopolitical issue.

What is needed is to elevate the strategic debate by identifying clearly—and assessing rigorously—the main options for countering China’s offensive in the South China Sea. Four basic strategies are available.

1. *Rollback* aims to push China back from its recent gains in the South China Sea and restore the status quo ante; it accepts a substantial likelihood of military conflict as the price of attaining this ambitious objective.
2. *Containment* accepts Chinese gains made to date, in recognition of just how difficult and dangerous it would be to reverse those gains, but draws the line firmly—including by threat or use of military force—against further advances.
3. *Offset* does not seek to prevent further Chinese encroachments in the South China Sea, but aims to penalize Beijing for destabilizing actions, while also offsetting their impact through measures that strengthen the overall U.S. position in the region.
4. *Accommodation* accepts Chinese dominance of the South China Sea, on the theory that it is simply too costly and perilous to compete with Beijing in its own back yard, and instead seeks to ensure a smooth transition to Chinese regional primacy.

None of these strategies is perfect, and each has substantial liabilities that accompany its advantages. In the final analysis, however, a strategy that blends the most-compelling aspects of containment and offset is best suited for protecting U.S. interests at a reasonable cost—and for steering the proper course in a turbulent South China Sea.

## THE SITUATION IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

The situation in the South China Sea is both complex and simple. The complexity lies in the fact that this body of water is the subject of multiple disputes among China, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and most recently Indonesia.<sup>3</sup> The simplicity lies in the fact that only one of those claimants—China—has been making a concerted drive for regional primacy.

In 2009, China surprised regional observers by submitting to the United Nations its so-called nine-dash-line map, which claimed up to 90 percent of the South China Sea. Since then, China has become increasingly coercive in dealing with its South China Sea neighbors, through measures such as asserting “indisputable sovereignty” over disputed features and seizing effective control of Scarborough Shoal from the Philippines in 2012. Meanwhile, China has upgraded its facilities in the Paracel Islands, particularly the military base on Woody (Yongxing / Phu Lam) Island, which now houses a military-grade airfield, aircraft shelters, and missile batteries. Since 2013, moreover, China has “reclaimed” roughly 3,200 acres of land in the Spratly Islands, compared with just 120 acres for Vietnam and less (or none) for the other claimants.<sup>4</sup> Beijing has created artificial islands and military bases on seven features in the Spratlys, three of which now house three-kilometer-long airfields with aircraft shelters, advanced radars, and point defenses.

In addition to expanding its military footprint, Beijing has announced and enforced fishing and resource-exploitation restrictions in various parts of the South China Sea, empowered its coast guard and maritime militia to interfere with the vessels of other nations, regularly allowed Chinese-flagged fishing boats to exploit endangered species in disputed areas, and made clear that it intends to disregard any legal challenges to its claims. In mid-2016, for instance, Beijing simply brushed aside the ruling of the arbitral tribunal that largely invalidated the nine-dash line and found that many of China’s maritime claims and activities were not in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.<sup>5</sup> Finally, Beijing has become more assertive in challenging foreign activity in the South China Sea by increasing its own military presence in the area, harassing American planes and vessels (as well as those of other countries), and warning Washington against “interfering” in China’s ongoing maritime disputes.<sup>6</sup>

By any reasonable standard, then, recent years have seen a pattern of Chinese rhetoric and behavior geared toward making Beijing the dominant power in the South China Sea.<sup>7</sup> Chinese gains have been incremental rather than sudden, and Beijing has calibrated its actions carefully to avoid triggering a military clash with Washington or galvanizing the region to balance against it. Nonetheless, the cumulative results have been significant. “In short order,” writes one former Obama administration official, “China has laid the foundation for control of the South China Sea.”<sup>8</sup>

So why does any of this matter to the United States? Some American experts on Asia assert that it does not—that Washington’s own “core interests are not really at stake” in the South China Sea.<sup>9</sup> After all, the United States has taken no position on who has sovereignty over the South China Sea and the various features therein, other than to argue that the disputes should be resolved peacefully

through negotiations free from coercion. Why, then, should Washington take risks to prevent Beijing from controlling and exploiting maritime features that the United States maintains might be Chinese in the first place?<sup>10</sup> The answer is that China's offensive is not simply a matter of who controls "a bunch of rocks on the other side of the world"; it is a challenge to a series of key U.S. interests in the South China Sea and the broader Asia-Pacific region.<sup>11</sup>

From an economic perspective, trade through the South China Sea amounts to roughly U.S.\$3.4 trillion per year, and many U.S. allies and partners are highly

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dependent on both the commerce that passes through that waterway and the resources—from fish to oil and natural gas—that can be extracted from it.<sup>12</sup> Were China to become the predominant power in the area, it would have the

capability to put a choke hold on one of the world's most important trade routes if it wished to do so—or Beijing simply could use the implicit threat of doing so to coerce and influence other countries that rely disproportionately on this dynamic portion of the global commons.

From a military perspective, China's seven bases in the Spratlys (and its upgraded facilities in the Paracels) greatly extend the reach of both its antiaccess forces and its power-projection capabilities. Chinese bases in the Spratlys are some five hundred miles south of Woody Island, putting new areas at risk from Chinese missiles and aircraft. In peacetime, these bases provide Beijing with facilities to help it exert control over the South China Sea using military, coast guard, and maritime militia forces.<sup>13</sup> In wartime, these bases would be vulnerable to U.S. attacks—but nonetheless they would allow Chinese forces to complicate American operations in support of the Philippines or other allies and partners.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, from a geopolitical perspective, the stakes are high indeed in the South China Sea. The United States long has sought to prevent any rival power from dominating East Asia or a significant part thereof. America's standing in the Asia-Pacific is largely dependent on its ability to uphold existing rules of the road, such as freedom of navigation and peaceful resolution of disputes, and face down challenges to the region's stability and order, as well as its openness. Thus, permitting Chinese control over a critical part of a critical region would represent a major strategic setback for the United States; it also might embolden China to attempt to revise the status quo elsewhere, whether in Taiwan, the East China Sea, or the Indian Ocean.<sup>15</sup> Not least, it would signal to regional observers that Washington no longer can play its traditional role in the Asia-Pacific, and thereby would encourage regional players to accommodate Beijing rather than

join with the United States to balance against an increasingly assertive China. Countries in Southeast Asia have been explicit about their need for continued U.S. engagement, lest they be forced to bandwagon with China, as the Philippines has done under Rodrigo Duterte.<sup>16</sup> Thus, from a geopolitical standpoint, the struggle over the South China Sea is not about “rocks,” but about whether states in Southeast Asia and the greater Indo-Pacific region will align with the United States or China.

Although U.S. interests in the South China Sea are clear, U.S. policy there remains muddled.<sup>17</sup> The Obama administration frequently warned China not to carry out “reclamation, construction, or militarization” in the South China Sea, but these statements created expectations among states in Southeast Asia that U.S. leaders were unwilling to fulfill. Meanwhile, Washington worked diligently to strengthen U.S. diplomatic relationships and military capabilities in the region, yet U.S. leaders refused to comment publicly on whether the U.S.-Philippine Mutual Defense Treaty would apply in the South China Sea. The United States also encouraged Southeast Asian states to push back against Chinese coercion in both diplomatic and legal forums, and the White House worked with Congress to begin upgrading the maritime awareness and security capabilities of allies and partners in the region. Yet, as well-intentioned as these efforts were, the Obama administration ended its second term with a more divided Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), despite China’s construction spree on disputed features and coercion of ASEAN members. Beijing’s lead over its neighbors in military and other coercive capabilities also remained enormous, and in most cases—most notably the seizure of Scarborough Shoal in 2012—Beijing simply went ahead with reclamation, construction, militarization, or other destabilizing actions despite U.S. warnings or attempts at mediation. As Obama’s presidency ended, there was a growing perception in the region—and even among some senior American policy makers—that the administration had drawn redlines that it ultimately had not upheld, and that too often it had failed to slow, let alone halt, China’s drive for primacy.<sup>18</sup>

So far, the Trump administration too has struggled to articulate an effective approach. Administration officials initially took a hard line, with Secretary of State-designate Rex Tillerson suggesting in his confirmation hearing that Washington might prevent Beijing physically from accessing its artificial islands in the Spratlys.<sup>19</sup> Then the issue appeared to recede from the policy agenda as the administration focused on bilateral trade and North Korea as the dominant issues in U.S.-China relations. Although the U.S. military has conducted freedom-of-navigation operations (FONOPs) to challenge China’s (and other states’) excessive claims, the administration has given the impression—which has been noted in key countries such as Vietnam—that it lacks an overall strategy for addressing Chinese advances.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, Vietnam’s reported decision in July 2017 to back

down in the face of explicit Chinese threats, rather than to continue exploiting its own claimed offshore energy resources, provides a recent and disturbing indication of the effectiveness of Beijing's coercive strategy.<sup>21</sup> The lack of top Asia-focused officials in place at the State Department and other key agencies only has exacerbated this problem.<sup>22</sup>

As China consolidates existing gains, and perhaps seeks new ones, America's strategic options and maneuvering space only will decrease. It is imperative that U.S. leaders decide what course to follow—whether to roll back, contain, offset, or accommodate China's growing influence in the South China Sea.

## STRATEGIC OPTIONS

### *Rollback*

The most ambitious strategy would aim to roll back China's gains—essentially, to force Beijing to withdraw from key features in the South China Sea (certainly the artificial features in the Spratly Islands, and perhaps its holdings in the Paracel Islands as well), or at the very least to demilitarize those features by removing the military facilities and capabilities. As noted, Rex Tillerson initially appeared to support such a policy when he called not simply for halting Chinese island building but also for denying Beijing access to artificial islands constructed to date.<sup>23</sup> In addition to barring access to the islands, a rollback strategy might seek to force Beijing to walk back its maritime claims in the South China Sea—in particular, to abandon the nine-dash line and accept the 2016 arbitral tribunal ruling, which held that China must derive its maritime entitlements from legitimate claims to land features.

The core premise of a rollback strategy is that China's increasing dominance in the South China Sea poses an unacceptable risk to U.S. interests, and that the South China Sea will become a "Chinese lake" unless Beijing's advance is not simply halted but reversed. By this logic, permitting China to consolidate even its existing gains will allow it to threaten or disrupt trade flows, rob other Southeast Asian countries of badly needed economic resources, and strengthen its regional military position in ways that threaten U.S. freedom of action. Most importantly, regional states—always sensitive to who is winning the Sino-American competition for influence—will bandwagon with Beijing if they conclude that Washington lacks the capability or will to restore the status quo ante. The United States therefore should confront China in the South China Sea today, when it still enjoys a preponderance of military and geopolitical power in the region, rather than tomorrow, when the balance may have shifted decisively in China's favor, owing to Beijing's rapid economic growth and corresponding military buildup.

Rollback is thus an extremely forward-leaning strategy, one that would rely heavily on the threat or use of force, as well as other coercive measures, to compel

Beijing to pull back. At the most extreme, the United States might attack physically features in the Spratlys or Paracels, or threaten to do so, to eliminate their military facilities and force a Chinese withdrawal. A less aggressive alternative would be to blockade or quarantine the islands (on the legal theory that China enjoys no rights of access to islands it has created illegally), but U.S. forces still would have to be willing to risk war by intercepting Chinese ships or aircraft seeking to break the blockade.<sup>24</sup> As either a substitute for or complement to these approaches, the United States might use economic or diplomatic measures—broadly applied trade sanctions, threats to recognize Taiwan's independence and conclude a formal mutual-defense treaty with Taipei, or other relatively dramatic nonkinetic moves—to generate the coercive pain necessary to persuade China to relinquish its South China Sea claims.<sup>25</sup>

The appeal of rollback is obvious, because the strategy—if successful—would restore U.S. credibility and remove a major threat to American interests in the Asia-Pacific. And there is little question that, if the United States were willing to pursue the most aggressive versions of rollback—military assault or blockade—it could achieve the desired strategic objective. Great gains do not come cheaply, however, and the risks of this strategy would be tremendous.

First, given the degree to which the Chinese Communist Party has staked its prestige and legitimacy on standing up to foreign powers in general and asserting expansive claims in the South China Sea in particular, it seems unlikely that anything short of military conflict actually would suffice to achieve the aims of this strategy. Retreating in the South China Sea would be a great humiliation for the Chinese leadership; one imagines that Beijing would be willing to accept a great deal of pain rather than submit to it. After all, Chinese leaders repeatedly have made clear that they view the South China Sea as both a part of China and a vital national interest, and as Fu Ying, chairwoman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the National People's Congress of China, has warned, "The people won't tolerate if we lose territory yet again."<sup>26</sup> Washington therefore would have to be prepared to wage war to remove Beijing from its features in the South China Sea—and, most likely, to be willing to paint itself as the aggressor by firing the first shot in that conflict. The United States almost certainly would win such a conflict—particularly if it occurred in the next few years—but the military costs, potential for escalation, and reputational costs likely would be severe.

A second, related point is that the United States probably would find most regional states—which would fear being caught in the middle of a shoot-out between their primary trading partner and their primary security patron—strongly opposed to such a strategy. Few, if any, regional states—even other South China Sea claimants—would support rollback openly; it is not hard to imagine U.S. allies such as the Philippines moving further away from Washington and toward

Beijing were the United States to take this approach.<sup>27</sup> Rather than upholding U.S. relationships in the Asia-Pacific, in other words, rollback might weaken them severely. Finally, even if rollback did not lead to a military conflict, China likely would respond by imposing costs of its own: ceasing cooperation on an array of other issues in the relationship—from North Korea to climate change—and perhaps increasing its coercive activities in the East China Sea, putting additional pressure on Taiwan, or using economic measures to punish U.S. businesses.

Even in the best-case scenario, then, rollback would lead to a severe disruption of the bilateral relationship and alienate many U.S. allies and partners; at worst, it could plunge Washington and Beijing into precisely the military conflict that American policy makers long have sought to avert. For these reasons, it is highly unlikely that rollback will be attempted; indeed, not even the most hawkish U.S. national security experts have advocated such a strategy openly.<sup>28</sup>

### *Containment*

Should the risks associated with rollback prove prohibitive, a second strategic option is containment. The goal of containment would be to stop China from using force or coercion to alter any element of the status quo in the South China Sea, and particularly to prevent it from building additional features or seizing features held by other nations. The basic logic of this approach is that, while rollback may be too dangerous, any further erosion of the situation in the South China Sea is unacceptable. Additional Chinese gains would undercut the credibility of American leadership and guarantees in the region and risk allowing Beijing to complete its dominance incrementally. Containment thus would permit Beijing to keep what it has, but it would draw the line firmly against further advances.

In practice, containment would mean issuing sharp, clear warnings against further Chinese expansion or coercion, coupled with policies meant to substantiate those warnings. Washington would station substantial military forces in and near the South China Sea to respond quickly if Beijing sought to seize features held by other nations; it also might consider landing U.S. forces on features controlled by American allies and partners to discourage aggressive Chinese moves.<sup>29</sup> To dissuade China from undertaking further land reclamation, the United States would threaten explicitly to sanction Chinese individuals or entities involved in such activities. Washington would maintain a robust regimen of FONOPs, preferably in concert with friends and allies from within the region and beyond, and it would refuse to recognize—and, if necessary, prevent China from enforcing—any declaration of straight baselines in the Spratly Islands to match previous illegitimate declarations in the Paracels, or any air defense identification zone (ADIZ) in the South China Sea not limited to accepted interpretations of international law. Finally, the U.S. government would continue upgrading U.S. military capabilities in the Asia-Pacific, negotiating additional military-access

and -basing arrangements, and enhancing the maritime self-defense capabilities of Southeast Asian partners and allies, all to ensure that America and its friends maintain the military superiority and escalation dominance necessary to make containment credible.

Containment is thus a hard-edged, confrontational policy, one that is heavily reliant on military tools. Yet a primary selling point of containment is that it is both less risky and less difficult to execute than rollback because it relies on deterrence—preventing China from seeking new gains—rather than compellence—

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requiring China to accept the humiliation of giving up gains it has pocketed already.<sup>30</sup> And while the United States so far has struggled even to halt China's advance on any consistent basis, containment has

worked in certain isolated cases that might serve as "proof of concept" for a larger strategy. In a little-noted incident in 2014, for instance, China stopped seeking to prevent resupply of Philippine marines stationed on Second Thomas Shoal after the United States signaled its commitment by placing a maritime surveillance plane overhead. In this episode, Vice Admiral Robert Thomas, commander of the U.S. Seventh Fleet, also made a clear statement of U.S. resolve by saying, "Without going into hypotheticals, the Seventh Fleet is going to support this alliance, period."<sup>31</sup> Similarly, although the United States failed to prevent China from taking effective control of Scarborough Shoal in 2012, public reports indicate that, in 2016, China backed away from a planned effort to begin land reclamation there after U.S. officials issued explicit, high-level warnings that doing so might disrupt seriously the Sino-American bilateral relationship.<sup>32</sup>

In other words, China may be increasingly assertive, but only when it believes it can advance without encountering serious resistance. Beijing remains more risk averse when it comes to actions that could spark a military clash—or even produce a severe wrench in the relationship—with Washington. China has respected American redlines when those redlines are clearly drawn and seem likely to be enforced. Containment seeks to raise significantly the risks of further Chinese advances and thereby bring Beijing's offensive to a halt; it seeks to translate periodic successes into a more consistent policy of holding the line. And should China find itself stymied in the South China Sea over a long enough period, containment advocates suggest, Beijing eventually might moderate its behavior and conclude an equitable diplomatic settlement with its neighbors.

Nevertheless, containment also has significant limitations and liabilities. Diplomatic difficulties abound. Many U.S. allies and partners are likely to be

wary of such a policy, in part for fear of antagonizing China, in part for fear that Washington might lose its nerve should Beijing precipitate a crisis. Moreover, a policy of helping Hanoi, Taipei, or Manila hold the features that it has occupied or constructed would cede the moral high ground that Washington has claimed by championing widely accepted international rules and norms. More seriously still, containment does not deal with the military capabilities and positions that China has created already, nor does it prevent Beijing from emplacing additional capabilities on features it already controls. And, of course, containment requires the United States to run a significantly heightened risk of severe tensions with China, to be willing to jolt badly a relationship in which it has many and varied equities, and to be willing to follow through on its deterrent threats—resulting, potentially, in a Sino-American war—should Beijing not back down. Critics of U.S. policy in the South China Sea long have asked whether Washington is willing to fight a war to stop Chinese salami slicing; containment, like rollback, ultimately requires answering that question in the affirmative.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, holding containment in place is likely to become more dangerous and expensive over time, as China's ongoing military buildup shifts the strategic balance in the region. One recent RAND Corporation report indicates that the "tipping point" in a conflict over the Spratly Islands might come as soon as 2030, and that China's risk tolerance only will increase as its military power does.<sup>34</sup> Absent major and continuing U.S. military investments, a containment strategy eventually could become untenable. Containment in the South China Sea thus is likely to resemble containment as practiced in many other contexts: a potentially useful policy, but one that is nonetheless difficult, costly, and potentially dangerous to execute, and would require enormous patience and persistence to succeed.

### *Offset*

If U.S. leaders are not willing to accept the risks inherent in more-aggressive strategies, a third option would be to focus on offsetting—and penalizing—Chinese gains rather than directly preventing them. Washington would respond to Chinese moves in the South China Sea by imposing costs—diplomatic, economic, and otherwise—on Beijing; it also would work creatively to strengthen the relative positions of the United States and its allies and partners.<sup>35</sup> As its name implies, this strategy essentially would accept some short-term competitive losses in the South China Sea in hopes of offsetting those losses through longer-term competitive gains.<sup>36</sup>

Logically, an offset strategy derives from a peculiar mix of tactical pessimism and strategic optimism. Advocates of an offset strategy believe that trying to halt China's advances altogether risks danger and disappointment, because China's inherent geographical advantages allow it to choose when and where to press. In addition, the South China Sea simply matters more to Beijing than it does to

Washington: while it may be an important interest for America, it is absolutely crucial for China. Fortunately, advocates of this strategy contend, fully halting China's advance is not strategically necessary to uphold the broader U.S. position in the region.<sup>37</sup>

Washington may not be able to stop Beijing from dredging up sand at some isolated reef, for instance, but it can use a range of diplomatic and economic tools to force China to bear significant costs for such actions. Moreover, it can work to ensure that Chinese advances are more than matched by upgrades to the U.S. regional military posture and the deepening of America's security relationships with China's neighbors. By doing so, the United States can make China pay for each artificial island constructed by ensuring that any tactical advance for Beijing results in a broader strategic loss. Over time, this approach may persuade Chinese leaders that the game in the South China Sea is not worth the candle; at the very least, it will minimize, if not cancel out, the strategic benefits that China reaps from its offensive. The struggle for the South China Sea—and for the Asia-Pacific more broadly—will be decided not by who controls a few rocks, proponents of this strategy argue, but by who has the stronger overall position and who better commands the loyalties of the key regional players. An offset strategy keeps this bigger, longer-term picture in focus, as it also reduces the risks of a near-term conflict.

In practice, an offset strategy would accept Chinese changes to the status quo, so long as those changes did not lead to conflict with the United States or its treaty allies. Yet Washington would respond to Chinese advances, such as further land reclamation, by slapping economic sanctions on firms involved in such activities, by suspending broader bilateral economic initiatives such as negotiation of a bilateral investment treaty, or by incrementally expanding the U.S. defense relationship with Taiwan or other regional parties. When Chinese advances created regional unease, the United States would exploit them aggressively by continuing to broaden defense relationships and opportunities for basing access with countries throughout Southeast Asia and beyond; it also would continue to encourage Southeast Asian countries to challenge Chinese policy through diplomatic and legal forums. Not least, America would respond to Chinese assertiveness by deploying more advanced military capabilities to the South China Sea and strategic points surrounding the area, by exercising and operating more frequently and more visibly in the region, and by taking concrete steps to strengthen its overall military posture in the Asia-Pacific. In essence, an offset strategy would entail demonstrating to Beijing, through a wide array of measures, that its assertiveness will leave it only more encircled and isolated in the end.

The evident allure of this strategy, of course, is that it offers a chance to win the region without precipitating a U.S.-China conflict in the process. This is

precisely why the Obama administration pursued a variant of this approach from 2010 onward. Under Obama, the United States generally declined to provoke showdowns over particular Chinese advances (with the exceptions noted previously). But it also attempted to upgrade the U.S. alliance with the Philippines, pursued enhanced partnerships with Southeast Asian partners such as Vietnam, deployed additional military capabilities to the South China Sea and surrounding areas, and sought to inspire greater regional diplomatic unity in opposing Chinese coercion. The strategic logic was one of avoiding clashes in areas where

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*There is no guarantee that this hybrid strategy will work, of course; were there an obvious solution to China's challenge in the South China Sea, U.S. policy makers surely would have found it by now.*

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China had the upper hand, while simultaneously refocusing the competition on those areas where America's diverse regional relationships and greater overall strengths might give it the strategic edge.

Compelling as the strategy was in theory, however, the Obama years demonstrated that it also had a number of distinct weaknesses and challenges. First and most obviously, in the near term offset would do little or nothing to prevent China from consolidating existing gains or seeking new ones, with all the negative consequences—both material and psychological—that flow from that. Indeed, by not stymieing Chinese advances, the United States risks giving the impression—as it did under Obama—that it is walking back from its declared redlines because it is either unable or unwilling to stop Beijing's regional expansionism. That perception, in turn, may encourage regional states to acquiesce to rather than resist China's dominance of the South China Sea; it even may encourage Beijing to accelerate its drive for primacy.<sup>38</sup>

Second, if the hope is that cost imposition will affect Chinese decisions over time, then the costs imposed on Beijing must be quite significant—which once again raises the risk of significantly upsetting the relationship or triggering an undesired crisis.<sup>39</sup> This was precisely the problem that the Obama administration never could solve adequately. As former administration officials such as Ely Ratner have noted, the White House was determined to preserve stability in the overall relationship, and therefore never was willing to impose the higher costs necessary to make this approach work.<sup>40</sup>

Third, offsetting Chinese gains by improving the U.S. position and forging a stronger balancing coalition is easier said than done. Washington spent considerable time and energy upgrading its military and diplomatic relationship with Manila during the Obama years—only to see that progress jeopardized by the ascent of Rodrigo Duterte. American diplomats continually prodded ASEAN to take a firmer position on the South China Sea, but Beijing effectively derailed

these efforts by using its own economic and diplomatic leverage to keep regional states divided.<sup>41</sup> As a result of these challenges—and U.S. failure to ratify the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which would have linked the United States more closely to Southeast Asia—China had made short-term gains yet avoided most long-term costs when the Obama team left office.<sup>42</sup>

Finally, and related to this point, an offset strategy requires that U.S. officials continually walk a tightrope: acting aggressively enough to convince regional actors that Washington is serious about preventing Beijing from dominating the region, but not so aggressively as to unnerve allies and partners who often try to avoid explicit alignment. As Singaporean diplomat Bilahari Kausikan notes, “[t]o the countries of Southeast Asia, the American porridge is always going to be too hot or too cold; countries will always fear the United States entangling them in its quarrels with rivals or being left to deal with other major powers without adequate support.”<sup>43</sup> An offset strategy may carry advantages, then, but it also remains fraught with difficulties.

### *Accommodation*

This brings us to a fourth and final strategy available to the United States: accommodation. In contrast to the first three strategies, the goal of accommodation is not to stop Beijing’s destabilizing behavior ultimately, or even to maintain a dominant position in the South China Sea and the broader Asia-Pacific region. The goal, rather, is primarily to avoid conflict with China over the South China Sea, with a subsidiary objective of conserving the resources that would be needed to compete more effectively.

To that end, the United States unilaterally would make concessions to wind down tensions in the South China Sea. It would avoid military, diplomatic, or legal challenges to Chinese activities, essentially acceding—whether tacitly or explicitly—to Beijing’s island building, militarization, and coercion of its neighbors. FONOPs would be phased out; military exercises and presence would be reduced, if not terminated. The United States would maintain its alliances and security partnerships in the region, but it would make clear that its alliance guarantees do not cover disputed features such as Scarborough Shoal and Second Thomas Shoal, and it would urge its allies and partners to come to some diplomatic accommodation with Beijing. Just as the British acceded to U.S. primacy in the Western Hemisphere in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the United States would accede to Chinese primacy in the South China Sea in the twenty-first century, and encourage others to do likewise.

The core premise of this approach is that resisting Chinese dominance of the South China Sea is a fool’s errand. China already controls much of the area, this argument runs, and there is little that Washington can do short of threatening—and perhaps waging—war to halt Beijing’s progress. Rather than making

Scarborough Shoal or Second Thomas Shoal the West Berlin of the twenty-first century, then, Washington simply should recognize that Beijing's rise makes it inevitable that the South China Sea eventually will become a Chinese lake.

Variants of this strategy have been advocated periodically by observers within the Asia-Pacific region—including Australian strategic thinker Hugh White—and the logic of the approach is not entirely without merit.<sup>44</sup> Certainly, competing with China in the South China Sea will be costly and potentially dangerous over time; accommodation would avoid those costs and risks, at least in the short term. It is undoubtedly true that geography and an asymmetry of interest favor China in the South China Sea, just as geography and an asymmetry of interest favored America vis-à-vis Great Britain and other extraregional powers in the Caribbean

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*[F]or the United States to accomplish even the limited aims of this approach, it must be willing to accept greater risks, incur higher costs, and impose more-serious penalties on China than it has been willing to do to date.*

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in the late nineteenth century; accommodation thus would extricate America from a difficult struggle over distant waters and limit the danger of war with China. Moreover, given that the South China

Sea is of such great strategic and economic importance to China, it is not beyond the realm of possibility that Washington—if it acted skillfully—could gain some marginal Chinese concession on North Korea, climate change, or one of the myriad other important issues in the bilateral relationship in exchange for giving Beijing a free hand in the area.<sup>45</sup>

It seems unlikely, however, that even a complete U.S. capitulation in the South China Sea would lead Beijing to change its policy fundamentally on North Korea, Taiwan, or any other key issue, because Chinese leaders surely would assess that the weakness of the U.S. position on the South China Sea was compelling the United States to seek such a “grand bargain.” And as tempting as accommodation might be for a country with no shortage of challenges around the globe, the fact is that the benefits of this approach would be more than offset by powerful disadvantages.

A strategy of accommodation would undercut U.S. alliances and partnerships in Southeast Asia and beyond, by demonstrating that the United States is no longer willing to contest Chinese power in this area. Washington thereby would risk forfeiting the leadership role that the United States long has played in the region, while perhaps encouraging countries from Vietnam to the Philippines to align with a rising Beijing. Indeed, if the United States cannot summon the wherewithal to uphold the rules-based order, then American leaders should not expect smaller states to do so on their own. Moreover, although a policy of accommodation would reduce the risk of confrontation in the short term,

it might increase it in the long term. The lesson that Beijing surely would take away from such an approach is that American redlines are not actually so red and the country's "ironclad" alliance commitments are not actually so ironclad; that perception, in turn, could encourage greater Chinese risk taking that ultimately might transgress a real American redline and bring the two countries to blows.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, this approach would guarantee Chinese hegemony over the South China Sea, an area that American policy makers long have deemed to be of vital economic and geopolitical importance to the United States. It thereby would complicate dramatically any U.S. effort to defend Taiwan, the Philippines, and other partners and allies in the event of Chinese aggression or coercion. U.S. accommodation also would put China well on the path to becoming a regional hegemon of the sort America always has felt compelled to resist. Beijing indeed may have a greater interest in the South China Sea than Washington does, but it hardly follows that the United States has no interest there worth defending. Accommodation, in other words, would have devastating effects for the U.S. position in the Asia-Pacific—with no guarantee that it actually would reduce the danger of an eventual conflict with China.

Fortunately, selecting this undesirable option is unnecessary. China indeed is pressing assertively for primacy in the South China Sea—but the game is not yet over. As noted previously, there have been instances (at Second Thomas Shoal in 2014 and Scarborough Shoal in 2016) when Beijing backed down in the face of strong U.S. warnings and pressure. Yes, the United States has struggled to stem Chinese advances in the South China Sea on a consistent basis, but where it has

## SUMMARY OF SOUTH CHINA SEA STRATEGIC OPTIONS

Rollback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Physically attack Chinese forces in the South China Sea</li> <li>• Blockade Chinese forces on South China Sea features until they withdraw</li> <li>• Apply economic sanctions to force Chinese military to withdraw</li> <li>• Undermine "core" Chinese interests, such as Taiwan, unless China withdraws</li> </ul>
Containment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Land U.S. forces on features controlled by China's neighbors</li> <li>• Provide military support to other South China Sea claimants</li> <li>• Maintain a large regional military presence, especially near Scarborough Shoal</li> <li>• Recognize China's neighbors as rightful claimants of disputed features</li> </ul>
Offset	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enhance U.S. political-military engagement in Southeast Asia</li> <li>• Impose economic/diplomatic penalties in response to Chinese advances</li> <li>• Offset Chinese gains with greater U.S. military deployments</li> <li>• Encourage diplomatic and legal challenges to Chinese activities</li> </ul>
Accommodation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Publicly accept Chinese reclamation, construction, and militarization</li> <li>• Cease freedom-of-navigation operations in the South China Sea</li> <li>• Communicate that Washington will not intervene in regional disputes</li> <li>• Clarify that U.S. commitment to the Philippines excludes the South China Sea</li> </ul>

drawn redlines clearly and appeared ready to enforce them vigorously, China has not brought the matter to a climax. Were it simply impossible to resist or meaningfully offset the Chinese offensive, then accommodation might make strategic sense. But it is not impossible to do so, and accommodation thus would be the strategic equivalent of committing suicide for fear of death.

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS

So where does this analysis leave the United States? Neither of the extreme options—rollback or accommodation—represents a desirable strategy or an approach that the Trump administration is likely to adopt. Rollback has rhetorical appeal, but it would require Washington to accept extremely high levels of cost and risk, and it likely would endanger many of the objectives it is meant to protect. Indeed, this strategy would require Washington to accept far more risk than U.S. allies and partners themselves have accepted, a dynamic that is quite incongruous considering President Trump's emphasis on the importance of allies' contributions to their own defense. Conversely, an accommodation strategy effectively would abandon most of Southeast Asia to China. This would constitute a strategic disaster for the United States under any administration, but for an administration that has proclaimed itself determined to adopt a "strong" China policy, an approach that resembles appeasement is likely to be particularly unattractive.<sup>46</sup>

This leaves two strategic options: containing or offsetting Chinese actions in the South China Sea. Containment has worked in isolated cases, and it holds some promise of altering Chinese behavior through deterrence rather than compellence. Yet containment is still a costly and potentially dangerous strategy, one that an opportunistic adversary presumably will find numerous opportunities to test in the coming years. An offset strategy, for its part, would have the benefit of avoiding near-term military confrontations, while focusing U.S. leaders on the long-term objective of imposing costs on and enhancing regional balancing against China. Unfortunately, an offset strategy is difficult to execute in its own right, and, as the experience of the Obama era shows, it risks permitting further Chinese changes to the status quo and thereby undermining U.S. credibility with friends and adversaries alike. Containment and offset are certainly superior to the extreme options, but neither one is an ideal strategy in and of itself.

Containment and offset are not mutually exclusive, however, so the best approach for U.S. policy makers would be to combine the most compelling aspects of these two strategies, while seeking to avoid some of their associated liabilities. Specifically, the United States should contain the most destabilizing Chinese activities while offsetting and penalizing less threatening behavior.

The containment elements of a new strategy would demonstrate that the United States is willing to accept short-term risk—including military risk—to prevent

China from coercing regional states and consolidating control of additional features in the South China Sea. The United States has shown episodically that when it draws redlines clearly and credibly threatens to enforce them it can deter Chinese efforts to take features from other claimants (as with Second Thomas Shoal in 2014) and to build on contested features (as with Scarborough Shoal in 2016). If U.S. leaders are willing to issue clear deterrent threats, and to back up those threats with potential military, economic, and diplomatic sanctions, they may be able to mitigate the worst aspects of Chinese aggression by preventing Beijing from seizing or reclaiming additional disputed features.

The offsetting elements of the strategy, meanwhile, would seek to ensure that China suffers long-term losses whenever it obtains any short-term gains coercively. Unfortunately, no U.S. containment policy is likely to prevent China from using its maritime militia to harass other countries' vessels, violating the 2016 arbitral tribunal decision, further militarizing its existing artificial islands in the Spratlys, or declaring an ADIZ around the South China Sea.<sup>47</sup> The United States is just not likely to go to war, or even threaten to do so, in response to such run-of-the-mill coercion, and China knows as much. U.S. leaders therefore have little option but to impose economic and diplomatic penalties on Beijing in response to such actions, while offsetting such gains by enhancing the U.S. military posture in the region and working to build regional support for deeper American engagement and tougher policies toward China.

There is no guarantee that this hybrid strategy will work, of course; were there an obvious solution to China's challenge in the South China Sea, U.S. policy makers surely would have found it by now. A contain/offset hybrid still will entail many of the liabilities that inhere in the separate strategies: it will not reduce China's existing military-geopolitical footprint, for instance, nor will it preclude all forms of Chinese assertiveness and coercion in the region. This strategy, moreover, will be difficult to execute—for all the reasons spelled out previously—and will become ever harder to implement over time as China's power grows. Indeed, for the United States to accomplish even the limited aims of this approach, it must be willing to accept greater risks, incur higher costs, and impose more-serious penalties on China than it has been willing to do to date. A contain/offset strategy will not allow U.S. policy makers to avoid dangerous crises and daunting dilemmas—even if it does represent the best approach for navigating them deftly enough to preserve America's key interests in the South China Sea.

America has limped along without a clear or coherent approach in the South China Sea for several years. Now is the time to get serious about strategy—before it is too late.

## NOTES

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