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Steven Stashwick

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RESEARCH & DEBATE

"GETTING SERIOUS ABOUT STRATEGY IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA"

WHAT ANALYSIS IS REQUIRED TO COMPEL A NEW U.S. STRATEGY IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA?

Steven Stashwick

China's extensive island-building projects in the Spratly Islands, the aggressive harassment tactics of its maritime law-enforcement and paramilitary fleets, and its rejection of binding arbitration rulings on both those activities threaten the rules-based international order and pose political, economic, and potentially military threats to U.S. interests in the region. In "Getting Serious about Strategy in the South China Sea," from the Winter 2018 *Naval War College Review*, Hal Brands and Zack Cooper make an important contribution to the debate on how the United States should respond to China's challenge in the South China Sea.¹ However, because their argument in favor of finding a new strategy is isolated from the identified consequences that such new strategies would have on other policies, their analysis falls short of providing a compelling argument for the United States to pursue a substantially different South China Sea strategy.

Citing muddled and confused U.S. policies to date, Brands and Cooper systematically evaluate four broad strategies for a U.S. response, as well as the costs and hazards associated with each. Ultimately, they advocate combining aspects of two strategies—containment and offsetting—for implementation. However, in their analysis the authors perpetuate a tendency among South China Sea analysts to restate what makes the region important in isolation, but not to make the case about why it is more important than other aspects of the U.S.-China relationship and adjacent regional priorities.² Doing

Steven Stashwick is a lieutenant commander in the Navy Reserve. He has served in the Pacific Ocean region throughout his active and reserve careers, both afloat and ashore, and at the Pentagon in the International Engagement Directorate of the Navy Staff. He is a regular author on East Asian defense topics and strategy. He earned a BS in systems engineering from Virginia Tech and an MA in international relations from the University of Chicago.

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the latter is necessary to change the incumbent policy hierarchy and defaults. If such a reordering is self-evident to proponents of more-assertive policies, it demonstrably is not to decision-making authorities, and “Getting Serious” is unlikely to change that.

While their analysis admirably defines a universe of strategy options for the United States, Brands and Cooper do not provide a systematic way to evaluate the trade-offs they identify between the four strategies and other U.S. policy priorities. Without such a framework for comparing the value of a strategy’s expected benefits with the expected damage it would impose on other policy priorities, it is difficult to evaluate the merits of those trade-offs. The result is that the authors’ own strategy-selection criteria appear more subjective than systematic. Neither is it clear, in any case, that Brands and Cooper’s recommended hybrid strategy would be substantially different in execution from the strategy that emerged under President Obama and appears to be consolidating under President Trump.

Brands and Cooper present a compelling list of U.S. strategic interests in the South China Sea: the free flow of more than three trillion dollars in trade each year; the natural resources that regional states harvest and extract; the military-access challenge posed to U.S. forces by China’s island bases in the event of an armed conflict; regional stability and what is sometimes called the international rules-based order; and, more broadly, regional states’ ultimate choice to align and cooperate more with the United States than with China.³ The authors implicitly argue that America’s defense of these interests is incoherent and confused owing to a lack of systematic thinking about its strategic options, the priority objectives it should seek, and acceptable levels of risk in pursuit of those objectives. Their subsequent analysis evaluates four strategies for the United States: (1) rollback—to dislodge China coercively from its artificial island bases, (2) containment—to prevent China’s occupation or reclamation of additional geographic features, (3) offset—to match China’s military advances in the region with additional military capacity and capabilities of its own, and (4) accommodation—to acquiesce deliberately to China’s regional dominance.

However, advocating a change in U.S. South China Sea policy (or any policy) requires an affirmative and compelling argument for decision makers to accept additional risks to other policy interests in exchange for the expected benefits of a new course of action. Unfortunately, while Brands and Cooper consider the negative impact of each strategy on other U.S. policy priorities, such as armed-conflict avoidance, fairness in trade relations, and cooperation on climate change and North Korea’s nuclear program, and effects on other regional partners, they do not suggest how to place a value on those hazards. As a result, while a reader gains insight into why the South China Sea matters on its own terms, it is not clear why, or even whether, it matters enough to accept new risks to those other priorities

in the U.S.-China relationship or to other regional partner relationships. Today, U.S. South China Sea policies already are effectively subordinated to these other interests. By not providing an affirmative argument to reorder those strategic priorities, Brands and Cooper implicitly endorse the current strategic hierarchy, thereby undercutting their assertion that the United States should accept greater risk in the region.

Without such a prioritization framework, Brands and Cooper's recommended hybrid containment-offset strategy appears compelling less for its departures from existing policies than its similarities. The authors argue that the United States should contain China's ambitions to seize any additional geographic features in the South China Sea or to embark on renewed island reclamation. However, since containment would not prevent China from reinforcing its existing South China Sea bases (and might even encourage it), the United States also should seek to offset any such military advances with enhancements to its own regional military posture. Yet if this approach is intuitively attractive, it is unclear how new or substantively different it is from what the United States is pursuing already.

Their case for containment rests largely on its demonstrable efficacy in previous isolated containment efforts the United States has implemented to prevent China from occupying or reclaiming additional features in the South China Sea.⁴ But if Brands and Cooper's criticism is that U.S. containment efforts have been only episodic, they elide that China's recent expansion efforts have been similarly isolated and episodic. Arguing that U.S. containment now should be more comprehensive seems a distinction with little practical difference, as China has not occupied or reclaimed successfully any additional features beyond the original seven Spratly features it reclaimed and built up after 2013.⁵

In arguing for the offset component of their recommendation, Brands and Cooper do not differentiate meaningfully their version from the global Third Offset policy enacted by the Obama Pentagon and the pivot/rebalance to Asia to counter, in no small part, rising Chinese capabilities.⁶ While the Trump administration may have abandoned the "offset" name, it does not appear to have abandoned the underlying policies or acquisition goals, and its subsequently published strategies make commitment to responding to great-power competition explicit.⁷ Thus, while Brands and Cooper perhaps have helped clarify the terms and vocabulary of debate for a U.S. South China Sea strategy, they seem substantively to be advocating for the policy status quo. If U.S. policy has appeared confused or muddled, this is perhaps attributable less to a lack of analytic rigor than to issues of execution and the complexity of translating written policy into real-world effects.

Granted, the ultimate choice of strategy rests with U.S. political leadership, as do decisions about how to order U.S. policy priorities when they conflict. Brands and Cooper recognize this, which perhaps accounts for choosing not to address how to order the strategic priorities within the scope of their argument. But if the prioritization of one policy area over another is a political choice, it need not be a subjective one. Since the publication of their article, the Trump administration has published its National Security Strategy (NSS), which signals greater focus on China's strategic competition generally, and singles out the threat of China's island construction in the South China Sea specifically. However, the NSS does not assign any specific political or military means for addressing the South China Sea, nor does it provide a hierarchy of U.S. interests vis-à-vis China to assist in evaluating policy trade-offs.⁸

As Brands and Cooper assert, the free flow of trade, military access, and the rules-based order are important U.S. interests in the South China Sea. However, those interests are not generally self-evidently more or less important than other aspects of the U.S.-China relationship or other regional interests that would be hazarded by a new South China Sea policy. Since the Trump NSS does not provide an explicit hierarchy of those interests, it privileges the *de facto* hierarchy that deprioritizes the South China Sea today. At the same time, it does not prescribe such a hierarchy by policy guidance, leaving the door open to those who might advocate for elevating the South China Sea's importance. However, without demonstrating why preferred strategies will not affect other priorities adversely or why South China Sea objectives are sufficiently more important to hazard them, Brands and Cooper's analysis is insufficient to compel such a change in South China Sea strategy.

Nonetheless, Brands and Cooper's preferred hybrid strategy does suggest a re-search need and a potential policy opportunity. The authors admit that the hybrid strategy would not prevent additional militarization on the features China already occupies. This weakness is mitigated by the offset component, which would in theory match—or, rather, offset—any new Chinese capability in the region with additional U.S. and partner capabilities. But an offset strategy also effectively commits the United States to an arms race with China in a region where the latter enjoys advantages of economic ascendancy; geographic proximity; and the ability to concentrate forces more easily, given its fewer geographically diffuse security demands. The implication is that an offset strategy is more likely than not to exacerbate the security dilemma between the two competitors—a vexing problem the authors identify but leave unexplored. This recommends research into policy options to halt or limit further militarization of China's occupied features in the Spratly Islands, with a specific objective of preventing either permanent or rotational deployment of the force-projection capabilities those islands by now have

been built up to host. Such a policy course most likely would entail a bargain or implicit agreement, but—unlike the authors' accommodation strategy—would require maintaining some form of leverage or inducement to ensure compliance.

Such a course falls under a family of policies, such as confidence-building measures, crisis-management tools, arms control, and international law and institutions, that the United States and other Southeast Asian powers already pursue on an ad hoc basis or as supporting policies of the four strategies Brands and Cooper evaluate. But instead of considering these as policies intended only to mitigate the risks of those broad strategies, their systematic pursuit might constitute a fifth strategy option; call it risk attenuation. Like Brands and Cooper's hybrid strategy, it is largely a defense of the strategic status quo in the South China Sea. Such a course would not abandon the role of military balancing and suasion, but would privilege the prevention of armed conflict as an affirmative objective.

A risk-attenuation strategy may be criticized as Pollyannaish or naive by advocates of assertive versions of containment or offset policies, but such a strategy recognizes the constraint that those advocates thus far have failed to surmount, which is to offer decision makers a compelling argument to change the incumbent hierarchy of China policy priorities and accept the additional risk of armed conflict that their preferred strategies incur. To that end, a comprehensive comparison of those relevant strategic trade-offs is a worthy, if daunting, analytic endeavor. However, advocates of stronger South China Sea policies must be prepared that a systematic comparison of those priorities may not yield the compelling justification to change the status quo that they imagine; indeed, it may be just as likely to endorse the current policy "muddle" as being appropriate to the broader U.S. interests in China and East Asia.

NOTES

1. Hal Brands and Zack Cooper, "Getting Serious about Strategy in the South China Sea," *Naval War College Review* 71, no. 1 (Winter 2018), pp. 13–32.
2. Representative of the analytic observation that other China and regional issues retain the U.S. government's priority while appealing for greater attention to the South China Sea is Ely Ratner in Andrew Erickson et al., "China's Menacing Sandcastles in the South China Sea," *War on the Rocks*, March 2, 2015, warontherocks.com/.
3. Brands and Cooper, "Getting Serious," pp. 16–17.
4. The authors cite successful containment of Chinese interference at Second Thomas Shoal in 2014 and of an apparent Chinese intent to conduct land reclamation at Scarborough Shoal in 2016 following high-level U.S. warnings and commitments to the status quo.
5. Mischief, Cuarteron, Subi, Fiery Cross, Gaven, Johnson, and Hughes Reefs in the Spratly chain, plus the Paracel group to the north, all were occupied by China prior to the wave of land reclamation and construction that began in 2013, meaning none were occupied expressly for that purpose. The only known subsequent attempt at physical

occupation and reclamation was the case of Scarborough Shoal, which the United States successfully deterred, as Brands and Cooper note. See “Occupation and Island Building—China” (China Island Tracker), *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*, amti.csis.org/.

6. For an overview of the Third Offset’s goals and associated activities, see reporting on remarks by Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert O. Work and the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in Cheryl Pellerin, “Deputy Secretary: Third Offset Strategy Bolsters America’s Military Deterrence,” *DoD News*, October 31, 2016, www.defense.gov/. On the military component of the rebalance to Asia, see remarks by the Secretary of Defense in Ashton Carter, “Remarks on the Next Phase of the U.S. Rebalance to the Asia-Pacific” (speech at the McCain Institute, Arizona State Univ., Tempe, AZ, April 6, 2015), available at www.defense.gov/.
 7. Offset is no longer explicit Pentagon policy in the Trump administration, and some of the Pentagon offices associated with it apparently have diminished under the Trump administration; see, for example, Paul McLeary, “The Pentagon’s Third Offset May Be Dead, but No One Knows What Comes Next,” *FP*, December 18, 2017, foreignpolicy.com/. However,
- Trump Secretary of Defense James Mattis announced at the beginning of his tenure that any focus on capabilities and modernization would not come until the Pentagon’s 2019 budget was in place; see Secretary of Defense, memorandum, “Implementation Guidance for Budget Directives in the National Security Presidential Memorandum on Rebuilding the U.S. Armed Forces,” January 31, 2017, available at media.defense.gov/. The modernization priorities that the Pentagon’s 2019 budget proposal expresses, as well as those of combatant commanders and service chiefs, suggest that the technologies and capabilities that the Third Offset championed, such as hypersonic weapons, artificial intelligence, and machine-learning integration, remain relevant. See “FY2019 Budget Proposal,” *Department of Defense*, www.defense.gov/. Also see, for example, “Statement of Admiral Harry B. Harris Jr., U.S. Navy, Commander, U.S. Pacific Command, before the Senate Armed Services Committee on U.S. Pacific Command Posture, 15 March 2018,” *United States Senate Committee on Armed Services*, www.armed-services.senate.gov/.
8. “National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” *White House*, December 2017, pp. 2, 46, www.whitehouse.gov/.