

# **The PLA's Evolving Role in China's South China Sea Strategy**

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During the past eight months of the global COVID pandemic, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) has been active in promoting China's claims in the South China Sea. This essay evaluates PLA statements, military exercises and operations, and deployment of relevant platforms and weapons in the South China Sea during this period. I leverage Chinese-language sources in addition to my own operational knowledge from over a decade of military experience to provide greater context for these activities. I argue that the greatest change in the PLA's role in the South China Sea has not been operational. Instead, the most interesting development has been the fact that the PLA has taken on a more significant signaling role. Specifically, the Chinese military seems to be purposefully using, and perhaps even exaggerating, its capabilities and activities to enhance deterrence against the United States. This may be seen as necessary as the US increases its own efforts to push back on China's militarization of the South China Sea. In other words, the PLA has taken a more active role in China's South China Sea strategy, but not necessarily a more aggressive one.

In March 2020, the majority of the world went into lockdown, restricting internal movements to varying degrees to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus.<sup>1</sup> Largely due to a failed government response, the United States has had the most disastrous experience with the pandemic, leading the world in total COVID cases and deaths to date.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, there has been a surge of concern about US military readiness.<sup>3</sup> The ability to fight if necessary and meet the demands of assigned missions is the foundation of US deterrence around the world. Thus, this concern about readiness has naturally evolved into a debate about the degree to which countries such as China are taking advantage of the global pandemic to make military gains.<sup>4</sup>

This essay contributes to this debate by analyzing the evolving role of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in the South China Sea during the past eight months. Specifically, I evaluate PLA statements, military exercises and operations, and deployment of relevant platforms and weapons in the South China Sea and provide my impressions of continuity and change in the PLA's role. I leverage Chinese-language sources in addition to my own operational knowledge from over a decade of military experience to provide greater context for these activities.

I argue that the greatest change in the PLA's role in the South China Sea has not been operational. Analysts expect incremental increases in Chinese military exercises and capabilities in the South China Sea as China's military modernizes. Instead, the most interesting development has been the fact that the PLA has taken on a more significant signaling role. Specifically, the Chinese military seems to be purposefully using, and perhaps even exaggerating, its capabilities and activities to enhance deterrence against the United States. This

may be seen as necessary as the US increases its own efforts to push back on China's militarization of the South China Sea. In other words, the PLA has taken a more active role in China's South China Sea strategy, but not necessarily a more aggressive one.

In this discussion, I may use the word "respond" in the colloquial fashion to describe how one action comes after another. I do not mean to imply that US military operations are *causing* the PLA to play a more active role in promoting China's territorial position. Certain activities, such as shadowing US vessels, by their nature occur in response to what the US does. China may choose the timing and messaging of military exercises or weapons tests to enhance its signaling value, but these activities must occur regardless of readiness purposes.

China also has an incentive to argue that its military activities are in response to the US for political cover, even if the military planned to execute a certain mission or deploy a certain capability regardless.<sup>5</sup> But the two countries are engaged in strategic competition in the South China Sea, meaning that both sides are trying to shape the behavior of the other. To provide some context for the following analysis of the PLA's role, I begin with an overview of US activities in the South China Sea since March 2020.

### **US South China Sea Activities**

The Chinese government has faced unprecedented levels of US pressure against its expansion in the South China Sea during the past eight months.<sup>6</sup> This summer, US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo declared that "Beijing's claims to offshore resources across most of the South China Sea are completely unlawful."<sup>7</sup> The United States then penalized 24 Chinese companies involved in South China Sea island-building by removing their access to the American market.<sup>8</sup> Aside from economic sanctions, one of the main ways in which the United States military signals its rejection of China's overly expansionist maritime claims is freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs), operations in which the US Navy sails through areas over which China has illegally declared sovereignty.

Under the Donald J. Trump administration, the United States has increased the frequency of these FONOPs. In 2018 and 2019 alone, at least a dozen times US Navy vessels sailed within 12 nautical miles of islands and reefs claimed or occupied by China. The United States conducted as many FONOPs in the first half of 2020 as the Barack Obama administration did during almost two years.<sup>9</sup> There were also several prominent non-FONOP operations, including the July 2019 flight of two US Air Force B-1B strategic bombers in the South China Sea on a mission in concert with the USS *Ronald Reagan*.<sup>10</sup> According to a Beijing-based think tank, 60 US reconnaissance aircraft flew close to China in September 2019, 41 of which were over the South China Sea.<sup>11</sup> More broadly, the United States held at least 85 joint military exercises in the Asia Pacific in 2019.<sup>12</sup>

These activities occurred against the backdrop of an overall increase in tensions. In July, China ordered the closure of the US consulate in Chengdu following the US closing of China's Houston, Texas, consulate due to intellectual property violations.<sup>13</sup> China and the United States also clashed at the United Nations General Assembly in September when President Xi Jinping accused President Trump of lying regarding his claims about China's role in spreading the

coronavirus.<sup>14</sup>

## Chinese Military Activities in the South China Sea

Throughout 2020 the PLA has also been more actively operating and exercising in the South China Sea. The uptick in operational tempo is somewhat expected as China's military capabilities increase and expand, with the PLA acquiring systems that can operate adeptly at longer ranges. Additionally, in 2016 China gained the ability to forward deploy systems by constructing 3,200 acres of artificial islands and accompanying military facilities (including 3,000 meters of runways, naval berths, hangars, reinforced ammunition bunkers, missile silos, and radar sites).<sup>15</sup>

During the past eight months, the Chinese military has clearly continued to increase its presence in the South China Sea. Several major movements and exercises have garnered international attention.<sup>16</sup> Some of the most important include the following:

- **Mid-March 2020.** Two Chinese military aircraft conducted an anti-submarine drill over the South China Sea.<sup>17</sup>
- **April 6–11.** A Chinese marine survey vessel, the *Haiyang Dizhi 8*, backed by China's navy and coast guard, disrupted a Malaysian oil exploration project within Malaysia's exclusive economic zone.<sup>18</sup>
- **May 6.** The PLA Navy (PLAN) conducted a convoy exercise in the South China Sea while on route to an anti-piracy exercise in the Gulf of Aden. The navy group included Type 52D destroyer *Taiyuan* and Type 54A frigate *Jinzhou*, both of which belong to the third detachment of the PLA Eastern Theater Command. The exercise included rescue missions and anti-piracy tasks.<sup>19</sup>
- **May 14.** China deployed early warning aircraft and anti-submarine aircraft on Fiery Cross Reef.<sup>20</sup>
- **June 18.** In mid-June, a destroyer detachment of the PLA Southern Theater Command Navy conducted an exercise to improve the PLA's anti-aircraft, anti-missile, and anti-submarine capabilities. According to the *PLA Daily*, the exercise involved Type 52D destroyer *Hohhot* and Type 54A frigate *Hengyang*, both of which belong to the second detachment of the PLA Southern Theater Command.<sup>21</sup>
- **June 27.** A PLAN warship, Type 071 (also called the “*Yuzhao* class”), docked in the harbor at Woody Island. The Type 071 is a landing platform dock capable of carrying helicopters, troop battalions, and cargo such as amphibious vehicles. It is believed that the warship was docked in preparation for the July 1–5 exercises.<sup>22</sup>
- **July 1–5.** China conducted five days of military exercises in the Paracel Islands, during which time China's Maritime Safety Administration prohibited passage throughout the entire Paracel Islands region.<sup>23</sup> The exercises used Woody Island as a base, and experts believe an island seizure or island security exercises were performed. Before the exercise, a Type 071 landing helicopter dock and three smaller ships were seen in the harbor of Woody Island.<sup>24</sup>
- **July 11–13.** Chinese frigates *Meizhou* (Hull 584), *Liu Panshui* (Hull 514), and *Qujing* (Hull 508) attached to a frigate flotilla under the PLA Southern Theater Command for a maritime realistic training exercise that included firing guns against sea targets.<sup>25</sup>
- **July 17.** China moved at least eight fighter aircraft (believed to be J-11Bs and JH-7s) to

Woody Island, China's largest military base on the Paracel Islands.<sup>26</sup>

- **July 30.** According to the Chinese Ministry of National Defense, the PLA conducted drills featuring new aircraft (*Xian* H-6J and *Xian* H-6G).<sup>27</sup> The training included night takeoffs and landings, long-distance operations, and firings on maritime targets.<sup>28</sup>
- **August 4.** Su-30 fighter jets completed a 10-hour armed patrol mission to the most remote islands and reefs of the South China Sea (Subi Reef in the Spratly Islands), breaking the previous PLA record in terms of flight duration in a single sortie by a fighter jet.<sup>29</sup>
- **August 6.** The Chinese PLA Rocket Force supposedly launched a DF-26 anti-ship ballistic missile as part of a larger exercise.<sup>30</sup>
- **August 12.** The PLAN's newly revealed bomber, the H-6J, deployed to Woody Island for the first time.<sup>31</sup>
- **August 16.** The PLAN conducted a successful test of a torpedo, launching from a *Jiangdao* corvette, according to CCTV.<sup>32</sup>
- **August 24–29.** During overlapping time periods, China held three separate drills, two of which were located near the Yellow Sea and one of which—an exercise near the disputed Paracel Islands—was located in the South China Sea.<sup>33</sup>
- **August 26.** China launched several ballistic missiles, including DF-26B and DF-21D missiles, which are termed “carrier killer” weapons, into the South China Sea as part of integrated military exercises and a simulated attack on US ships. The missiles landed between Hainan and the Paracel Islands.<sup>34</sup>
- **September 28.** China held five simultaneous naval exercises, two of which were live-fire and were held near the Paracel Islands.<sup>35</sup>

PLAN warships, China Coast Guard (CCG) vessels, and Chinese-flagged survey ships are also frequent visitors to the man-made islands, so much so that these movements are somewhat routinized and not often reported on unless these platforms come into contact with platforms of another country.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, besides a gap in May and about a three-week period in July–August, since early April CCG ships have been consistently deployed to Scarborough Shoal, which is claimed by both China and the Philippines.<sup>37</sup>

The CCG has also been known to use force to deter other claimants from fishing or navigating in disputed waters, such as the April 3 sinking<sup>38</sup> and the July 8 ramming of Vietnamese fishing vessels near the Paracel Islands.<sup>39</sup> There have also been a number of advancements in the broader PLAN that will affect the balance of power in the South China Sea, such as the advent of China's new *Renhai*-class cruisers; the largest surface combatant in the world; the first *Renhai*-class cruiser was commissioned in January 2020.<sup>40</sup> The Chinese aircraft carriers *Liaoning* and *Shandong* conducted regular training and sea trials during the summer and most recently in September.<sup>41</sup> While the *Shandong* entered into service this past December, it is not yet combat-ready; the *Liaoning* took six years to achieve initial operational capacity after it was commissioned in 2012.<sup>42</sup>

In the above section, I have compiled a comprehensive picture of Chinese military activities in the South China Sea that includes both deployments of systems to the Paracels and Spratlys and military exercises in the area. I now turn to an analysis of what these two types of military activities reveal about the PLA's role in China's South China Sea strategy.

## **What Do the Deployments of Weapons Systems Tell Us About the PLA's Role?**

PLA deployments to the South China Sea suggest the PLA is trying to discourage the United States from countering its attempts to increase control over the South China Sea.

First, China has deployed to the South China Sea the types of systems the PLA would need to exert control over the area.<sup>43</sup> Control requires both comprehensive awareness of the environment and the capabilities to compel and coerce states to follow the PLA's rules. To achieve this, China first needs systems that monitor activity on, and under the sea and in the air in, the disputed areas, such as forward-deployed surveillance aircraft.

Once China establishes awareness of others' activities in the South China Sea, it will need certain capabilities to enforce its sovereignty claims. This includes multirole fighters that can be used to intercept and escort other countries' aircrafts; these fighters can be deployed to the South China Sea islands or they can operate off an aircraft carrier in the area. These are precisely the types of capabilities that are periodically deployed to the islands.<sup>44</sup> One capability the PLA would need if it were to control the South China Sea that we have not seen is command and control (C2) aircraft. In particular, the Southern Theater Command is far away from the Spratly Islands, and greater connectivity in the form of C2 is a step we should expect to see as the transition to the theater commands is completed.

Second, the PLA seems to want to enhance its deterrence without provoking the United States. The PLA has not moved to a clearly offensive posture in the South China Sea; fighter aircraft, for example, have never landed on any of the Spratly Islands, and anti-ship ballistic missiles have never been deployed to the man-made islands.<sup>45</sup> This may be for political reasons—the desire to prevent further escalation and maintain the narrative that the PLA's posture there is purely defensive.

But there are also operational reasons. China may not keep fighter aircraft permanently present on the islands because of the high maintenance requirements; the ocean environment with its humidity and heavy amounts of salt threatens to corrode equipment.<sup>46</sup> For anti-ship ballistic missiles, moving them farther south than Hainan is not necessary from a range standpoint and would open China up to potentially losing those strategic assets early in a conflict (they would be easier to find and strike).

Third, as I discuss in greater detail in the next section, China has been linking its deployments to US activities for signaling purposes. The PLA is trying to communicate to the United States that it can respond quickly to any US activity seen as a threat to its interests. With new basing on the South China Sea islands and longer-range and more capable aircraft, China now has the option to move these platforms as a way to demonstrate to the United States its capability and resolve.

## **What Do the Exercises Tell Us About the PLA's Role?**

During the past five months in particular, China has conducted more robust military exercises to prepare for South China Sea contingencies. This is a reflection of Xi Jinping's call for the

Chinese military to engage in more realistic exercises “to prepare for a comprehensive military struggle.”<sup>47</sup>

Indeed, only a few weeks ago during a visit to a military base,<sup>48</sup> President Xi told Chinese troops to “put all [your] minds and energy on preparing for war.” China is also undergoing massive military reforms to include transitioning from military regions to a theater construct; exercises are essential for testing and perfecting new C2 arrangements.<sup>49</sup> The increased operational tempo during the summer is not unusual given that this is the PLA’s standard exercise period.

But military readiness and preparedness are not the only reasons the PLA conducts exercises. During the past few months, the PLA role has evolved beyond the operational to become a leader in a signaling strategy to enhance Chinese deterrence vis-à-vis the United States. I come to this conclusion based on the timing, nature, and discourse around these activities.

First, many of these exercises were conducted immediately after a US military action. The March anti-submarine drills occurred shortly after the USS *Roosevelt*’s movements in the region.<sup>50</sup> The South China Sea exercise of the Hong Kong garrison followed the deployment of a US carrier strike group to the area to conduct maritime air-defense operations.<sup>51</sup> In July, the PLA conducted military exercises in three seas (the South China, East China, and Yellow Seas) as the USS *Ronald Reagan* and USS *Nimitz* conducted tactical air-defense exercises in the South China Sea.<sup>52</sup> The July movement of fighter aircraft to Woody Island came only days after both a US FONOP in the region and Secretary of State Michael Pompeo’s remarks on the South China Sea.<sup>53</sup> The August launches of anti-ship ballistic missiles, significant threats to US aircraft carriers, occurred days after US aircraft carriers conducted operations in the South China Sea.<sup>54</sup> On September 28, China held five simultaneous naval exercises, two of which were live-fire and were held near the Paracel Islands. These drills were notable, first, because they were held at the same time in four different seas and, second, because they followed Chinese accusations that the US had flown spy aircraft over the South China Sea.<sup>55</sup>

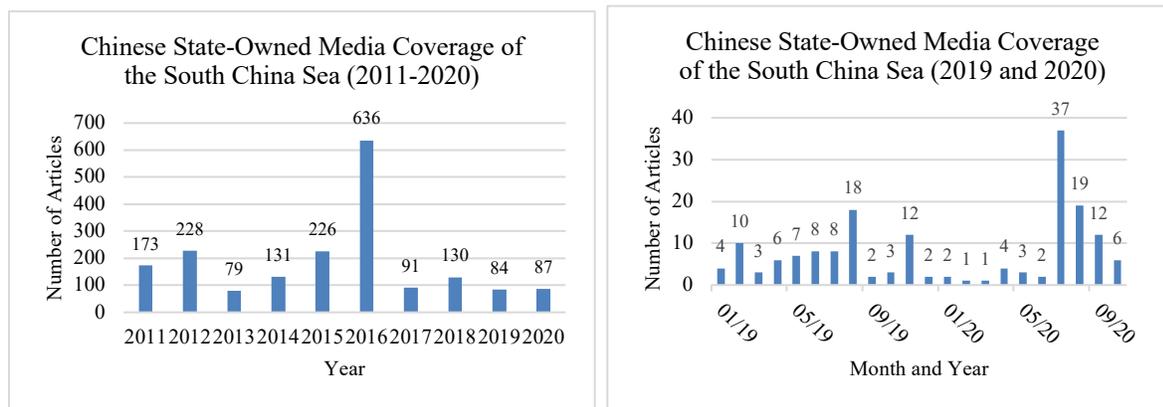
Second, the capabilities China is exercising and displaying are the most relevant ones for a contingency against the United States in the South China Sea. The main missions would be anti-surface warfare and an air campaign over the disputed islands.<sup>56</sup> The most relevant capabilities for these missions are strike aircraft, anti-ship ballistic missiles, anti-ship cruise missiles, and submarines. Because the primary advantage of submarines lies in their stealth, it is unsurprising that China has not been leveraging its undersea capabilities in its signaling campaign.

But the PLA has been predominantly focused on demonstrating other capabilities in its various deployments and exercises; there were three clear anti-submarine exercises, four involving strike aircraft and another three instances of anti-ship missile tests and launches. Strike capabilities were the most exercised in general—from showing that the *Xian* H-6J and *Xian* H-6G can do night takeoffs and landings, long distance operations, and firings on maritime targets to showing that torpedo launches from China’s guided missile corvettes can also successfully hit their targets.<sup>57</sup>

China has demonstrated more sophisticated anti-submarine warfare capabilities. In March, two Chinese aircraft conducted an anti-submarine drill over the South China Sea.<sup>58</sup> In May, China

deployed anti-submarine aircraft that excel in surveillance capabilities of ground-based radar at Fiery Cross Reef.<sup>59</sup> The August missile firings were the most notable, which allegedly included the DF-26B and the DF-21D, or “carrier killer,” simulating a strike on a US warship.<sup>60</sup>

**Figure 1. Chinese State-Owned Media Coverage of the South China Sea, 2011–20 and 2019–20**



Source: Author.

Third, the Chinese media often add warnings to their coverage of PLA activities in the South China Sea. For example, after China’s August missile test, PLA sources specifically said these were meant as a warning to the US.<sup>61</sup> With the August deployment of H-6J, Chinese media highlighted its electronic warfare and strike capabilities, against the US in particular.<sup>62</sup> When the DF-26 anti-ship ballistic missile was launched as part of a larger exercise, the Chinese media stated that “the live-fire DF-26 exercises showed that the US cannot use aircraft carriers.”<sup>63</sup>

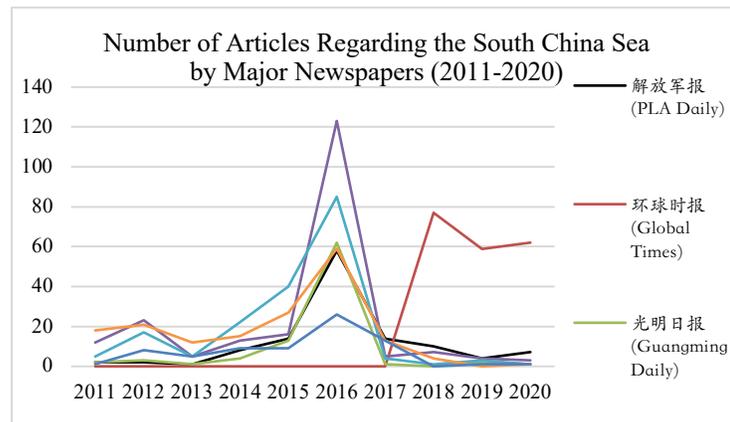
I now address the past eight months of Chinese media coverage of military activities in the South China Sea in greater detail.

### Chinese Discourse About the South China Sea

Like military activities and deployments, Chinese discourse about military issues in the South China Sea has experienced more of a qualitative than a quantitative change over the past eight months. The degree to which the Chinese media have covered events in the South China Sea has remained relatively stable during the past eight months, though there was a spike during the summer that corresponds with an increase in Chinese military exercises and movements. To date, 2020 has seen an average of 9.33 articles per month; only three other years since 2011 had lower monthly averages: 2013 (6.58), 2017 (7.75), and 2019 (7.08).<sup>64</sup> (See Figure 1.)

Also, the patterns in the type of newspapers doing most of the reporting is consistent as well. Since 2018, the *Global Times*, a non-authoritative subsidiary of the *People’s Daily* with strong nationalist views, has published the vast majority of the articles, while venues such as *PLA Daily* and *People’s Daily* have put forth few such articles. (See Figure 2.)

**Figure 2. Number of Articles Regarding the South China Sea by Major Newspapers**



Source: Author.

The Chinese military and defense establishment also continues to be the main spokesperson on South China Sea military issues, with statements released by both the Ministry of National Defense and the Southern Theater Command (the part of the Chinese armed forces in charge of South China Sea contingencies). The fact that the situation has not escalated to upper-level party members, such as Xi Jinping, suggests that the situation remains relatively under control and the incidents are too small to warrant higher-level attention. Fourteen statements have been issued about the South China Sea since March, all about US operations there and with similar messaging.<sup>65</sup>

PLA Southern Theater Command statements usually assert:

- US military has trespassed into Chinese territory.
- US operations are destroying peace and stability in the region.
- The US is violating and demonstrating disregard for international rules, norms, and law.
- US behavior is an act of hegemony and military provocation.
- The US should immediately halt all provocative acts in order to prevent miscalculation (literally, unpredictable events: 以免引发不测事件).<sup>66</sup>
- The US should focus on dealing with COVID-19 at home instead of causing problems in the South China Sea.
- The statements end with a call upon the PLA Southern Theater Command to maintain a high degree of vigilance and to take all necessary means to defend national sovereignty and security and to safeguard peace and stability in the South China Sea.<sup>67</sup>

Chinese Ministry of National Defense statements include similar elements but tend not to be as extensive. Moreover, it seems that the Southern Theater Command is in charge of responding to US freedom of navigation operations, while the Ministry of National Defense comments on broader issues such as US joint exercises<sup>68</sup> and US criticism of Chinese exercises.<sup>69</sup>

### What Does Chinese Discourse Tell Us About the PLA's Role?

One of the strongest indicators that the Chinese military is attempting to leverage its role to

signal capability to the United States is how the official media are capturing the ongoing competition. A review of the approximately 80 publications on the South China Sea reveal a number of messages.

First, the PLA is publicizing operations more than ever with a focus on how capable it has become in conducting complex operations in the South China Sea. In March, when China conducted anti-submarine warfare drills, the media reported that the aircraft were successful in identifying suspicious objects.<sup>70</sup> Naval exercises in July were characterized as “realistic”<sup>71</sup> and air drills were characterized as “high-intensity exercises” to include simulated nighttime takeoffs, long-range raids, and attacks on sea targets.<sup>72</sup> The naval exercise incorporated counterstrike and rescue missions, both of which concluded with success. The Ministry of National Defense did not reveal any details regarding the air drills except the participation of H-6J and H-6G bombers and it concluded that the exercise met expected results.

In August, the PLA released a video of Su-30 fighter jets completing a 10-hour armed patrol mission to the most remote islands and reefs in the South China Sea, demonstrating that the PLA Air Force had broken its record on flight duration in a single sortie by a fighter jet.<sup>73</sup> In August, CCTV released on Weibo information about a torpedo test, noting that it successfully hit its target.<sup>74</sup>

Chinese media also try to signal Beijing’s resolve on its maritime disputes, stating that “the PLA has prepared for ‘conflict tonight’ scenarios. Chinese soldiers are committed to countering provocations, and, in the event of attack, will not hesitate to counter-attack. This would be the worst-case scenario”<sup>75</sup> and “any American attempt to challenge China in the South China Sea will amount to nothing.”<sup>76</sup> CGTN, China’s international media arm, reported, “China is not scared of ‘provocation and pressure’ from the United States, and will resolutely defend itself and not allow the United States to cause trouble.”<sup>77</sup>

Second, as mentioned before, the Chinese media are being used to amplify the PLA’s signaling. The Chinese government has never indicated directly that Chinese military exercises intend to send warning signals to the US. But Chinese media, especially unofficial media, often cite other reports that PLA activities in the South China Sea are meant as warnings to the US.<sup>78</sup> Chinese media, in line with official statements, also often warn of the potential risk of escalation “brought by the increasingly frequent incoming US warplanes and military vessels in the South China Sea.”<sup>79</sup>

Lastly, Chinese media highlight that the PLA is blameless for the current tensions in the South China Sea. Instead, the dominant narrative being promulgated is that US domestic politics is the main motivation behind US strategy in the South China Sea. Specifically, the US is trying to deflect attention away from how the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting its military.<sup>80</sup> The PLA Southern Theater Command has argued that the US has failed to provide global public goods during the pandemic and has instead sought to destabilize the South China Sea.

Scholars associated with the PLAN also commented that despite the pandemic US provocation is a sign of fear and insecurity as Washington tries to prove its strength.<sup>81</sup> For example, on August 28, a *China Daily* op-ed stated:

We hope some US politicians can see the truth, be levelheaded and stop these provocations, so that China-US military relations and bilateral ties can return to their correct course. ... Some US politicians are sabotaging China-US relations for selfish reasons and even deliberately want to create an accident or military conflict.<sup>82</sup>

In sum, while official statements do not articulate that the United States is the target of the exercises, the timing, media strategy, and capabilities exercised suggest that the US is the target audience. Thus, the PLA military is playing a central role in attempts to deter and dissuade the United States from engaging in military operations in the South China Sea.

## **Conclusion**

In capitals around the world, it has become conventional wisdom that the Chinese military is taking advantage of the global pandemic to make gains in its territorial disputes.<sup>83</sup> Whether it is the standoff and increased violence along the Sino-Indian border, increased incursions into Taiwan's airspace, or increased military presence near the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands in the East China Sea, the Chinese military is more active than ever.<sup>84</sup>

But the situation is slightly different in the South China Sea, where the United States still holds a decisive military advantage due to its ability to project power and sustain operations across vast distances. This review of Chinese military activities, deployments, and statements relevant to the South China Sea provides some insights into Chinese military strategy given its current disadvantageous position.

First, the PLA has been cautious in its direct interactions with the US military. China has not engaged in risky brinksmanship with US platforms, and direct encounters have tended to be safe and professional. Instead, the PLA is using its military power indirectly to signal its capability to impose costs on the United States if war were to break out.

Second, the change in the PLA's role in the South China Sea has been more qualitative than quantitative. PLA activities, deployments, and verbal reactions have not deviated significantly from what would be expected given the steady increase in its capabilities. The PLA, however, has become the main vehicle through which China is attempting to convince the US to moderate its own South China Sea approach.

Third, the need to enhance deterrence vis-à-vis the US has become a priority, even at the expense of revealing capabilities or exacerbating tensions with other claimants. In the past, China would choose the timing and nature of deployments and exercises to downplay its operational significance and promote the narrative that China's posture was defensive;<sup>85</sup> more often than not, public statements would not even accompany the event. But now the military is keen to demonstrate to the United States its offensive capabilities.

This reflects the deep-seated insecurity growing in Beijing that President Trump may try to start a war against China in the South China Sea. Chinese media have been reporting on the role of

“October Surprises”<sup>86</sup> (events near the US presidential elections that significantly affect the outcome) in American politics, with some outlets suggesting that the Trump administration may orchestrate a military conflict over the South China Sea to improve its election prospects.<sup>87</sup> China thus has incentives to exaggerate its activities and capabilities in the South China Sea, a clear departure from past protocol to downplay and hide any activities to avoid enhancing threat perceptions.

Information about many activities listed in this essay come directly and solely from Beijing; it is difficult to verify how successful certain exercises were, or even if some operations, such as the 20-hour flight, occurred. But what the increased military tempo and its extensive publicity suggest is that China wants the world, and especially the United States, to know that its military can inflict great costs on any country that threatens its South China Sea position.

Lastly, increased Chinese military activity is more likely a sign of insecurity than confidence. Historically, China acts the most rashly when it feels vulnerable and fearful that others will take advantage of perceived weaknesses. If the PLA were planning a military operation to extend Chinese control over the South China Sea, or one of the other occupied islands, we would not hear about it until it was too late. The fact that the PLA’s focus is on public signaling suggests China is unlikely to make military moves in this area. But its sensitivity, and in some cases paranoia, about US strategy suggests we are likely to hear tough talk and ostentatious military activity for some months to come.

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### **About the Contributor**

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> BBC News, “Coronavirus: The World in Lockdown in Maps and Charts,” April 6, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-52103747>.

<sup>2</sup> *Guardian*, “Covid World Map: Which Countries Have the Most Coronavirus Cases and Deaths?” October 25, 2020, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/25/covid-world-map-countries-most-coronavirus-cases-deaths>.

<sup>3</sup> For examples of the concern, see Rachel Tecott and Erik Sand, “How Coronavirus Will Affect the US Military,” *Washington Post*, March 19, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/03/19/how-will-coronavirus-affect-us-military-readiness-national-security/>; and Diane DiEuliis and Laura Junor, “Ready or Not: Regaining Military Readiness During COVID19,” Institute for National Strategic Studies, April 10, 2020, <https://inss.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/2145282/ready-or-not-regaining-military-readiness-during-covid19/>.

<sup>4</sup> Lucio Blanco Pitlo, “Beijing’s Bold Moves in the South China Sea: Opportunism or the New Normal?” *South China Morning Post*, May 7, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3082931/are-beijings-bold-moves-south-china-sea-mere-opportunism-amid-covid>; Alex Ward, “How China Is Ruthlessly Exploiting the Coronavirus Pandemic It Helped Cause,” *Vox*, April 28, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2020/4/28/21234598/coronavirus-china-xi-jinping-foreign-policy>; and Kristin Huang, “China’s Navy Drills in 4 Regions Show Ability to Counter US, Observers Say,” *South China Morning Post*, August 24, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3098671/chinas-navy-drills-4-regions-show-ability-counter-us-observers>.

<sup>5</sup> 小浪, “外媒: 中国拟将国产航母编队部署南海 回应美军挑衅,” 手机新浪网 (Foreign Media: China Plans to Deploy Aircraft Carriers in the South China Sea in Response to U.S. Provocations), Sina, May 8, 2020, <https://mil.sina.cn/zgjq/2020-05-08/detail-iircuyvi1973458.d.html?&cid=56268>. I have had numerous conversations in the past with Chinese military officers in which they suggested that this is often the case.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Sutter and Chin-Hao Huang, “China Faces Stronger US Opposition in South China Sea,” *Comparative Connections*, September 15, 2020, <http://cc.pacforum.org/2020/09/china-faces-stronger-us-opposition-in-south-china-sea/>.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Pompeo, “U.S. Position on Maritime Claims in the South China Sea,” United States Department of State, July 13, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-position-on-maritime-claims-in-the-south-china-sea/>.

<sup>8</sup> Ana Swanson, “U.S. Penalizes 24 Chinese Companies Over Role in South China Sea,” *New York Times*, August 26, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/26/business/economy/trump-sanctions-south-china-sea.html>.

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<sup>10</sup> Brian Everstine, “B-1s Fly Through South China Sea Sending Message to Beijing,” *Air Force Magazine*, July 23, 2020, <https://www.airforcemag.com/b-1s-fly-through-south-china-sea-sending-message-to-beijing/>.

<sup>11</sup> Kristin Huang, “US Sent 60 Spy Planes Close to China in September: Beijing Think Tank,” *South China Morning Post*, October 13, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3105279/us-sent-60-spy-planes-close-china-september-beijing-think-tank>.

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<sup>15</sup> Alexander Neill, “South China Sea: What’s China’s Plan for Its ‘Great Wall of Sand’?” BBC News, July 14, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53344449>.

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<sup>17</sup> Teddy Ng, “Chinese Naval Planes Conduct Anti-Submarine Drills in South China Sea,” *South China Morning Post*, March 21, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3076273/chinese-naval-planes-conduct-anti-submarine-drills-south-china>.

<sup>18</sup> Rozanna Latiff and A. Ananthalakshmi, “Malaysian Oil Exploration Vessel Leaves South China Sea Waters After Standoff,” Reuters, May 12, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-security-malaysia-idUSKBN22O1M9>.

<sup>19</sup> Reference News, “解放军南海‘实战化演练’引关注” (PLA South China Sea Exercise Caught Attention), May 6, 2020, <http://www.cankaoxiaoxi.com/mil/20200506/2409564.shtml>.

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- <sup>32</sup> Jinshan Hong, “China’s Hong Kong Garrison Fires Torpedoes in Military Drill,” Bloomberg, August 16, 2020, <https://www.bloombergquint.com/china/china-h-k-garrison-conducts-firing-drills-as-u-s-navy-deploys>.
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<sup>36</sup> Storey, “Why Doesn’t China Deploy Fighter Jets to the Spratly Islands?”

<sup>37</sup> It is likely the Chinese Coast Guard has been consistently operating around Scarborough Shoal since April, but not all of the deployments have been publicly reported.

<sup>38</sup> Khanh Vu, “Vietnam Protests Beijing’s Sinking of South China Sea Boat,” Reuters, April 4, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-vietnam-china-southchinasea-idUSKBN21M072>.

<sup>39</sup> YouTube, “Chinese Coastguard Ship Douses Vietnam Fishing Boat in South China Sea Clash,” 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=30GTmLourT8>.

<sup>40</sup> Zachary Williams, “The PLAN’s Renhai-Class Cruiser and the Future of Anti-Access and Area Denial,” *The Diplomat*, April 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/the-plans-renhai-class-cruiser-and-the-future-of-anti-access-and-area-denial/>; and Xavier Vavasseur, “Shipyard in China Launched the 25th Type 052D and 8th Type 055 Destroyers for PLAN,” *Naval News*, August 30, 2020, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2020/08/shipyard-in-china-launched-the-25th-type-052d-and-8th-type-055-destroyers-for-plan/>.

<sup>41</sup> CGTN, “China’s Aircraft Carriers Conduct Sea Trials, Training as Planned,” September 24, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-09-24/China-s-aircraft-carriers-conduct-sea-trials-training-as-planned-U2Z37Y3e8g/index.html>.

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<sup>43</sup> Ben Werner, “New Air Bases, Baby Cabbage Key to Chinese Long-Term Claims in South China Sea,” *USNI News*, June 3, 2020, <https://news.usni.org/2020/06/03/new-air-bases-baby-cabbage-key-to-chinese-long-term-claims-on-south-china-sea>.

<sup>44</sup> Most movements of platforms and equipment were conducted in the context of a military exercise. (Although from the outside, it is difficult to decipher whether the PLA is using the guise of a supporting exercise to create a permanent presence on these islands.)

<sup>45</sup> Storey, “Why Doesn’t China Deploy Fighter Jets to the Spratly Islands?”

<sup>46</sup> Werner, “New Air Bases, Baby Cabbage Key to Chinese Long-Term Claims in South China Sea.”

<sup>47</sup> Mimi Lau, “Be Ready for Battle, Hardship, Crisis, Xi Tells Chinese Army,” *South China Morning Post*, January 5, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/2180772/chinese-president-xi-jinping-gives-army-its-first-order-2019>.

<sup>48</sup> Ben Westcott, “Chinese President Xi Jinping Tells Troops to Focus on ‘Preparing for War,’” CNN, October 14, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/10/14/asia/xi-jinping-taiwan-us-esper-intl-hnk/index.html>.

<sup>49</sup> However, it is surprising that China kept up the high exercise tempo throughout the summer in

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spite of COVID-19. (Although it is also possible the PLA chose a summer-fall schedule instead of a spring-summer schedule because of the pandemic.)

<sup>50</sup> Ng, “Chinese Naval Planes Conduct Anti-Submarine Drills in South China Sea.”

<sup>51</sup> Reuters, “US Sends Carriers to South China Sea during Chinese Drills,” *Straits Times*, July 4, 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/us-sends-carriers-to-south-china-sea-during-chinese-drills-media>.

<sup>52</sup> Kristin Huang, “China Fires ‘Aircraft-Carrier Killer’ Missile in ‘Warning to US,’” *South China Morning Post*, August 26, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3098972/chinese-military-launches-two-missiles-south-china-sea-warning>.

<sup>53</sup> H. I. Sutton, “China Sends Flanker Fighter Jets to South China Sea Amid Tensions,” *Forbes*, July 17, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/hisutton/2020/07/17/china-sends-flanker-fighter-jets-to-south-china-sea-amid-tensions/>.

<sup>54</sup> Liu Xuanzun, “PLA Rocket Force Launches DF-26 ‘Aircraft Carrier Killer’ Missile in Fast-Reaction Drills.”

<sup>55</sup> Reuters Staff, “China Holds Simultaneous Military Drills in Four Seas, Again.”

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<sup>57</sup> Hong, “China’s Hong Kong Garrison Fires Torpedoes in Military Drill.”

<sup>58</sup> Ng, “Chinese Naval Planes Conduct Anti-Submarine Drills in South China Sea.”

<sup>59</sup> Lu Li-shih, “China’s Expanding Military Reach,” *Taipei Times*, May 27, 2020, <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2020/05/27/2003737098>.

<sup>60</sup> Huang, “China Fires ‘Aircraft-Carrier Killer’ Missile in ‘Warning to US.’”

<sup>61</sup> Huang, “China Fires ‘Aircraft-Carrier Killer’ Missile in ‘Warning to US.’”

<sup>62</sup> Liu Xuanzun, “Chinese H-6J Bomber’s S.China Sea Deployment ‘to Suppress US Provocations.’”

<sup>63</sup> Liu Xuanzun, “PLA Rocket Force Launches DF-26 ‘Aircraft Carrier Killer’ Missile in Fast-Reaction Drills.”

<sup>64</sup> This analysis was conducted by searching CNKI, which includes most national newspapers and important local newspapers (generally around two provincial-level newspapers and less than one dozen municipal newspapers). I searched for 南海 (South China Sea) and eliminated all the irrelevant articles (which were mostly about a district in Foshan, Guangdong, called 南海区 [Nanhai District]).

<sup>65</sup> The Foreign Ministry also weighs in but mainly to respond to comments by its counterparts in the US State Department, not as the main spokesperson regarding military activities. Out of the 14 statements, six were made by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

<sup>66</sup> I have found this exact wording in PLA Southern Theater Command statements during the

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latter half of 2019, but statements between January and May 2019 did not use this phrase.

<sup>67</sup> *PLA Daily*, “南部战区新闻发言人就美舰非法闯我西沙领海发表谈话” (Southern Theater Command Spokesperson Commented on US Vessel Trespassing the Paracel Islands), March 11, 2020, [http://www.81.cn/xwfy/2020-03/11/content\\_9766364.htm](http://www.81.cn/xwfy/2020-03/11/content_9766364.htm); *PLA Daily*, “南部战区新闻发言人就美舰非法闯我西沙领海发表谈话” (Southern Theater Command Spokesperson Commented on US Vessel Trespassing the Paracel Islands), , April 28, 2020, [http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2020-04/28/content\\_9803159.htm](http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2020-04/28/content_9803159.htm); *PLA Daily*, “南部战区新闻发言人就美舰非法闯我西沙领海发表谈话” (Southern Theater Command Spokesperson Commented on US Vessel Trespassing the Paracel Islands), May 28, 2020, [http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2020-05/28/content\\_9823700.htm](http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2020-05/28/content_9823700.htm); *PLA Daily*, “南部战区新闻发言人就美舰非法闯我西沙领海发表谈话” (Southern Theater Command Spokesperson Commented on US Vessel Trespassing the Paracel Islands), August 27, 2020, [http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2020-08/28/content\\_9891567.htm](http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2020-08/28/content_9891567.htm); and *PLA Daily*, “南部战区新闻发言人就美舰非法闯我西沙领海发表谈话” (Southern Theater Command Spokesperson Commented on US Vessel Trespassing the Paracel Islands), October 9, 2020, [http://www.81.cn/yw/2020-10/09/content\\_9915375.htm](http://www.81.cn/yw/2020-10/09/content_9915375.htm).

<sup>68</sup> Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China, “国防部：坚决反对美澳在南海强化军事

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<sup>69</sup> Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China, “国防部新闻发言人任国强就美国防部发布消息指责我南海演习答记者问” (Ministry of National Defense Spokesperson Ren Guoqiang Responds to Questions Regarding US DOD’s criticism of Chinese Military Exercise in the South China Sea), July 9, 2020, [http://www.mod.gov.cn/info/2020-07/09/content\\_4867869.htm](http://www.mod.gov.cn/info/2020-07/09/content_4867869.htm); Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China, “国防部:美方南海‘兴风作浪’中方坚定‘乘风破浪

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<sup>71</sup> *PLA Daily*, “南海，舰艇编队快速反击” (Naval Fleet Launched Swift Counterstrike in the South China Sea), July 27, 2020, [http://navy.81.cn/content/2020-07/27/content\\_9861812.htm](http://navy.81.cn/content/2020-07/27/content_9861812.htm).

<sup>72</sup> *PLA Daily*, “海军航空兵组织新型战机在南海开展高强度训练” (Naval Air Force Organizes High Intensity Training in the South China Sea with New Jets), July 30, 2020, [http://www.81.cn/fb/2020-07/30/content\\_9870556.htm](http://www.81.cn/fb/2020-07/30/content_9870556.htm).

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<sup>77</sup> CGTN, “PLA Warns of Possible China-U.S. Military ‘Accidents’ Amid Escalation in South China Sea,” August 28, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-08-28/China-warns-U-S-to-stop-provocation-in-South-China-Sea-TjxwiZC05G/index.html>.

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