

# America's South China Sea Policy, Strategic Rebalancing, and Naval Diplomacy\*

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*The US South China Sea policy is designed to deny power transition in the Asia-Pacific. Strategic rebalancing has become America's Asia-Pacific Strategy for reassuring hegemonic stability and supporting its South China Sea policy. Practically, strategic rebalancing depends heavily upon naval diplomacy. As a result of US naval diplomacy, the DOC (Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea)-symbolized "ASEAN+China" mechanism is being eroded by the looming US-dominated neo-realistic framework, an indication that Washington's strategic rebalancing has secured preliminary success. Yet, the creditability of US naval diplomacy in the South China Sea ultimately rests upon the progress of the Navy's maritime strategy in the Asia-Pacific. Michael Mullen's idea of "landward push" of sea control resides at the core of the 2007 Maritime Strategy, of which the core operational mechanism is the Navy Expeditionary Combat Command (NECC). NECC is key to the AirSea Battle concept and naval diplomacy. The 2012 and 2013 Balikatan exercises have showcased the utilities of NECC and provided much edification: with the use of versatile naval diplomacy, the US Navy has insinuated Mullen's idea into the South China Sea, advanced AirSea*

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\*The author is grateful to the anonymous reviewers for helpful comments on a previous draft of this article. The views expressed in this paper are those of the author alone.

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*Battle, facilitated strategic rebalancing, and reassured its South China Sea policy. If China fails to fully comprehend the progress of America's maritime strategy, it may end up wrestling with a far superior balancing coalition that is being created by the US.*

**KEYWORDS:** hegemonic stability; maritime strategy; Mullenism; Navy Expeditionary Combat Command (NECC); AirSea Battle.

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Seyom Brown argued that the US global commercial interests and naval dominance gave it the incentive and the power to enforce Pax Americana.<sup>1</sup> However, as China rises to regional hegemony, a power transition is taking place in the Asia-Pacific. According to power transition theory, as the power gap between the declining power and the rising power closes, conflict is most likely if the latter is dissatisfied with its status quo and willing to use force to reshape the system.<sup>2</sup> The theory contends that peace may last when the most powerful state firmly keeps its top position and the positions of the others are clearly defined in the existing hierarchy.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, the United States may well take action to delay or even prevent the rise of China so as to sustain its hegemony. How the US will respond to the rise of a seafaring China has become a hot issue. Currently, in situations short of war, the political and diplomatic role of seapower will supposedly be far more commonly exercised in peacetime than in wartime. Naval diplomacy has become a prominent instrument in the realm of international politics. Yet, very few papers are dedicated to how naval diplomacy is leveraged by the existing superpower to serve its policy and strategy in the international arena. This article fills this analytical void by assessing a cross section of how

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<sup>1</sup>Seyom Brown, *The Illusion of Control: Force and Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2003), 75-76.

<sup>2</sup>A. F. K. Organski, *World Politics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), 334; M. Taylor Fravel, "International Relations Theory and China's Rise: Assessing China's Potential for Territorial Expansion," *International Studies Review* 12, no. 4 (December 2010): 505.

<sup>3</sup>Joshua S. Goldstein and Jon C. Pevehouse, *International Relations*, 9th ed. (New York: Russak & Company, 2010), 57.

the US employs naval diplomacy to support Washington's South China Sea policy and rebalancing strategy in response to China's increasing assertiveness in the region. The analyses and findings featured here will be instantly familiar to those schooled in the realpolitik tradition. It is the central contention of this study that South China Sea watchers may have to pay more attention to what the US Navy is doing to understand how effectively America is shaping the strategic environment in its favor.

### **US Interests, South China Sea Policy and Strategy**

#### *South China Sea: Arena for Power Transition*

Primary US security documents such as the National Security Strategy (NSS), Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), and National Military Strategy (NMS) may provide some clues about how the US will respond to the rise of a seafaring China.

The 1997 QDR defined vital national interests to include preventing the emergence of a hostile regional hegemon, ensuring freedom of the seas and the security of international SLOCs, ensuring uninhibited access to key markets, and deterring and defeating aggression against US allies and friends.<sup>4</sup> The 1998 NSS stated that the US would use military might unilaterally and decisively to defend its vital interests.<sup>5</sup> Primary security documents, including 2006 NSS, 2006 QDR, 2010 NSS, 2011 Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 2011 NMS, and 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance, have consistently sought to integrate China into the US-dominated neo-liberalistic system and hedge against China's challenge to the existing Pax Americana.<sup>6</sup> US

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<sup>4</sup>Office of the Secretary of Defense, ed., *Quadrennial Defense Review Report 1997* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 1997), Section III.

<sup>5</sup>President of the United States, ed., *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America 2006* (Washington, D.C.: White House, 2006), 5.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 26, 28, 30, 41, and 42; Office of the Secretary of Defense, ed., *Quadrennial Defense Review Report 2006* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2006), 41; President of the United States, ed., *National Security Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: White House, 2010),

bipartisan consensus of reassuring Pax Americana may be clearer if these documents are juxtaposed with related talks. In early 2001, Secretary of State Colin Powell defined China as a strategic competitor and a potential regional rival.<sup>7</sup> In early 2001, CIA Director George J. Tenet enumerated the “rise of Chinese power, military and other” as one of the three top threats facing the US.<sup>8</sup> In late 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton touted *America’s Pacific Century*; President Obama asserted that reductions in defense spending would not come at the expense of the Asia Pacific and that “the United States is a Pacific power, and we are here to stay.”<sup>9</sup> In mid-2012, Obama claimed that “the 21st century will be another great American Century.”<sup>10</sup> Such political aspirations imply that reassuring US dominance in the Pacific is the supreme goal of Washington’s neo-realistic hedging strategy.

These documents and talks highlight the fact that seapower competition and cooperation between America and China have become the central theme of international politics in the 21st century, and that the center stage stretches from the Western Pacific to the Indian Ocean. The biggest threat to US maritime hegemony in the Asia-Pacific comes from China’s “anti-

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43; Office of the Secretary of Defense, ed., *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2011* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2011), 23; Joint Chiefs of Staff, ed., *The National Military Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2011), 14; Secretary of Defense, US Department of Defense, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2012), 2, 4.

<sup>7</sup>US Department of State, “Confirmation Hearing by Colin L. Powell” (Washington, D.C., January 11, 2001), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2001/443.htm> (accessed January 13, 2004).

<sup>8</sup>The other two were terrorism and weapons of mass destruction; see Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 34-35.

<sup>9</sup>White House, “Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament” (remarks by President Barack Obama, Canberra, Australia, November 17, 2011), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament> (accessed November 20, 2011).

<sup>10</sup>White House, “Remarks by the President at the Air Force Academy Commencement” (remarks by the U.S. President Barack Obama, Canberra, Australia, November 17, 2011), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/05/23/remarks-president-air-force-academy-commencement> (accessed June 1, 2012).

access” and “area-denial” (A2/AD) capabilities coined by the Pentagon.<sup>11</sup> Bonnie Glaser believed that China’s development of A2/AD capabilities has the potential to deny access to the USN in the Western Pacific.<sup>12</sup> Admiral Robert F. Willard asserted that China’s A2/AD capabilities extend well into the South China Sea.<sup>13</sup> Patrick M. Cronin and Robert D. Kaplan further asserted that the South China Sea will be the arena for determining the future of US leadership in the Asia-Pacific and argued that if China’s increasing challenge to American naval preeminence is left unchecked, China could upset the balance of power that has existed since the end of World War II, and regional countries would have no choice but to bandwagon with a powerful China.<sup>14</sup> The South China Sea has seemingly become the center of the arena for power transition.

#### *Linking South China Sea Policy with Vital Interests*

On April 1, 2001, a PLA J-811 jet collided with a US EP-E3 Aries intelligence aircraft operating in international airspace off Hainan Island. The J-811 crashed killing its pilot and the EP-E3 was forced to make an emergency landing on Hainan. The incident highlighted the contentious issue of freedom of navigation between the US and China over the right of US military surveillance aircraft to operate in China’s EEZ. Again, in

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<sup>11</sup>China itself never uses the term A2/AD; instead, it uses the term counter-intervention. For the definition of A2/AD, according to General Norton A. Schwartz and Admiral Jonathan W. Greenert, strategies of the former deny an adversary entry into the region of conflict, while the latter deny an adversary movement and operations within the region of conflict; see Norton A. Schwartz and Jonathan W. Greenert, “Air-Sea Battle: Promoting Stability in an Era of Uncertainty,” *The American Interest*, February 20, 2012, <http://www.the-american-interest.com/article.cfm?piece=1212> (accessed June 16, 2013).

<sup>12</sup>Bonnie S. Glaser, “Armed Clash in the South China Sea,” *Council on Foreign Relations Press*, April, 2012, <http://www.cfr.org/east-asia/armed-clash-south-china-sea/p27883> (accessed December 9, 2012).

<sup>13</sup>Senate Armed Services Committee, “Statement of Admiral Robert F. Willard, US Navy Commander, US Pacific Command, before the Senate Armed Services Committee on Appropriations on US Pacific Command Posture” (statement, US Senate, Washington, D.C., February 28, 2012), 9.

<sup>14</sup>Patrick M. Cronin and Robert D. Kaplan, “Cooperation from Strength: US Strategy and the South China Sea,” in *Cooperation from Strength: The United States, China and the South China Sea*, ed. Patrick M. Cronin (Washington, D.C.: Center for New America Security, 2012), 7-8.

March 2009, the USNS *Impeccable* operating in China's EEZ was challenged by the PLA Navy. Clinton's announcement in July that the US was back in Asia demonstrated Washington's determination to get involved in South China Sea affairs. In March 2010, high-ranking Chinese officials reportedly asserted that China now considered the South China Sea part of China's "core interest" of sovereignty during a private meeting with James Steinberg, US Deputy Secretary of State, and Jeffrey Bader, senior director for Asian affairs at the National Security Council.<sup>15</sup> As the label "core interest" raised a dust cloud, US Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates enunciated the U.S.'s South China Sea policy during the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2010 to include the following five points:

1. Freedom of navigation and free and unhindered economic development should be maintained.
2. The US does not take sides on any competing sovereignty claims.
3. The US opposes the use of force and actions that hinder freedom of navigation.
4. The interests of the US/international corporations engaging in legitimate economic activities should be safeguarded.
5. All parties must work together to resolve differences through peaceful, multilateral efforts consistent with customary international law.<sup>16</sup>

Since then, America's South China Sea policy has been repeated by Obama and Clinton.<sup>17</sup> During the Association of Southeast Asian Nations

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<sup>15</sup>Michael Swaine examined the issue of "core interest" and confirmed that Chinese officials did not explicitly identify the South China Sea as a "core interest" in the March 2010 meeting; see Michael Swaine, "China's Assertive Behavior Part One: On 'Core Interests'," *China Leadership Monitor*, 2011, no. 34, <http://media.hoover.org/sites/default/files/documents/CLM34MS.pdf> (accessed June 15, 2013).

<sup>16</sup>US Department of Defense, "International Institute for Strategic Studies (Shangri-La—Asia Security) Remarks as Delivered by Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates" (Shangri-La Hotel, Singapore, Saturday, June 05, 2010), <http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1483> (accessed Jul 18, 2011).

<sup>17</sup>For example, see US Department of State, "Remarks at Press Availability" (remark by

(ASEAN) Regional Forum meeting in late July, Clinton called freedom of navigation a US “national interest” and urged “a collaborative diplomatic process” by all claimants to resolve the territorial disputes without coercion,<sup>18</sup> tantamount to publicly countering China’s argument about core interests and its bilateral approach in resolving the dispute. In late 2011, Clinton made it clear in her *America’s Pacific Century* that freedom of navigation in the South China Sea was in the “vital interests” of the US.<sup>19</sup>

The South China Sea plays an important role in commercial connection globally and regionally. China’s inclusion of anti-SLOCs as one of the missions of the PLAN<sup>20</sup> and extension of A2/AD capabilities into the South China Sea have not only posed a direct challenge to the commercial interests and naval dominance of Pax Americana, but have also threatened free trade and risked the interests of other regional powers heavily dependent upon SLOCs surrounding mainland China. Consequently, defining freedom of navigation in the South China Sea as “vital interests” implies deeper implications as follows. First, it suggests that China has challenged the vital interests of the US in many ways; as a result, it delivers a warning that America would go to war with China to defend its vital interests. Secondly, it emboldens various claimants to hedge against China’s rising power by supporting and facilitating the US forward presence as a counterbalance.<sup>21</sup> Thirdly, it helps regional powers realign their security outlook

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Hillary Rodham Clinton, National Convention Center, Hanoi, Vietnam, July 23, 2010), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/07/145095.htm> (accessed July 30, 2010). See also US Department of State, “South China Sea” (press statement by Patrick Ventrell, Washington, D.C., August 3, 2012), <http://www.state.gov/t/pa/prs/ps/2012/08/196022.htm> (accessed August 8, 2012).

<sup>18</sup>US Department of State, “Remarks at Press Availability.”

<sup>19</sup>Hillary Rodham Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 189 (November 2011): 57, 61.

<sup>20</sup>The PLAN doctrine for maritime operations focuses on six offensive and defensive campaigns: blockade, anti-sea lines of communication, maritime-land attack, antiship, maritime transportation protection, and naval base defense; see Office of the Secretary of Defense, ed., *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2010* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2010), 22.

<sup>21</sup>Bonnie S. Glaser, “Tensions Flare in the South China Sea” (online paper, Center for

toward the South China Sea and support collective intervention spear-headed by Washington. Lastly, it implicitly facilitates a balancing coalition against China, which ultimately helps the US deny power transition.

*Strategic Rebalancing for Hegemonic Stability in the Asia-Pacific*

Kevin Rowlands attributed “Pax Britannica” to “hegemonic stability,” a term coined by Robert Keohane to describe the situation in which a wider peace is the result of the diplomacy, coercion, and persuasion of the leading power.<sup>22</sup> Hegemonic stability theory contends that the international system is more likely to remain stable when a leading power exercises its preponderant leadership and provides some political and economic order by reducing anarchy, deterring aggression, promoting free trade, and overall acting like a central government in the international system.<sup>23</sup> Hegemonic stability theories seek to explain the sharing of any generated surplus or gains from cooperation.<sup>24</sup> Hence, a hegemonic system benefits not only the leading power itself but also other states that choose to bandwagon.<sup>25</sup> The aforementioned primary security documents of the US have echoed the argument of hegemonic stability; indeed, neo-liberalistic integration and a neo-realistic hedging strategy both serve the hegemonic stability provided and promoted by America.

Although the South China Sea may be the central issue in the arena for power transition, stakeholders involved in the issue are spread across the Asia Pacific. To reassure US hegemonic stability in the region, augmentation of influence and military commitment for shaping the strategic environment come to the fore. Hence, in late 2011, Clinton advocated

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Strategic and International Studies, June 30, 2011), 5, 7-8, [http://csis.org/files/publication/110629\\_Glaser\\_South\\_China\\_Sea.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/110629_Glaser_South_China_Sea.pdf) (accessed November 23, 2011).

<sup>22</sup>Kevin Rowlands, “Decided Preponderance at Sea”: Naval Diplomacy in Strategic Thought,” *Naval War College Review* 65, no. 4 (Autumn 2012): 93.

<sup>23</sup>Goldstein and Pevehouse, *International Relations*, 58.

<sup>24</sup>James E. Alt, Randall L. Calvert, and Brian D. Humes, “Reputation and Hegemonic Stability: A Game-Theoretic Analysis,” *American Political Science Review* 82, no. 2 (June 1988): 447.

<sup>25</sup>Goldstein and Pevehouse, *International Relations*, 53.



“pivoting toward Asia,” which meant making greater investment—diplomatic, economic, strategic and otherwise, solidifying treaty alliances, participating in multilateral institutions and utilizing “minilateral” meetings and “trilateral” opportunities, and continuing to stick to its positions in the South China Sea.<sup>26</sup> The most notable recent strategic guidance was the new Defense Strategic Guidance released in January 2012, which announced a “rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region.”<sup>27</sup> The new approach to the future US influence and military makeup recommended by the document is commonly referred to as “strategic rebalancing” or the “rebalancing strategy.” Consequently, the rebalancing strategy covers the whole area of the Asia-Pacific and has become the Asia-Pacific Strategy of the US for reassuring hegemonic stability.

Admiral Samuel J. Locklear, Commander of the US Pacific Command (USPACOM), believed the strategy draws on the strengths of the entire government, including diplomacy, trade, and security.<sup>28</sup> National Security Adviser Tom Donilon pointed out that strategic rebalancing is an effort that harnesses all elements of US power—military, political, trade and investment, development, and US values. He argued that these elements involve strengthening alliances; deepening partnerships with emerging powers; building a stable, productive relationship with China; empowering regional institutions; and helping to build a regional economic architecture.<sup>29</sup> New Secretary of State John Kerry even asserted leading US allies and partners to organize themselves around the four principles: strong

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<sup>26</sup>Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century.”

<sup>27</sup>Secretary of Defense, ed., *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership*, 2, 4.

<sup>28</sup>Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), “Presenter: Admiral Samuel J. Locklear III, Commander, U.S. Pacific Command DOD News Briefing with Adm. Locklear from the Pentagon” (Department of Defense, December 6, 2012), <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=5161> (accessed December 13, 2012).

<sup>29</sup>Tom Donilon, “The United States and the Asia-Pacific in 2013” (remarks by Tom Donilon at the Asia Society, New York, March 11, 2013), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/03/11/remarks-tom-donilon-national-security-advisory-president-united-states-a> (accessed June 22, 2013). See also Edward Chen, “Rebalancing Act US Policy of Rebalancing toward Asia Seen Continuing in Obama Second Term,” *Strategic Vision* 2, no. 9 (June 2013): 18.

growth, fair growth, smart growth, and just growth,<sup>30</sup> placing the center of gravity of the strategy on economic development. However, noteworthy, it is the Defense Strategic Guidance that gave birth to strategic rebalancing, and it is then-Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta and Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff Martin Dempsey that accompanied President Obama to announce the strategy, which indicates that the military element is the cornerstone of strategic rebalancing. Consequently, practical concerns about shifts in military posture, investment, and capability, and the increment of presence and engagement of forces are more prominent, as US House Representative Colleen Hanabusa suggested.<sup>31</sup>

The 2006 *QDR* already stipulated that the USN plans to adjust its force posture and basing to provide at least 6 CVNs and 60% of its submarines in the Pacific to support engagement, presence and deterrence,<sup>32</sup> indicating a trend in re-orienting the center of gravity of its military might toward the Asia-Pacific. After Clinton's assertion of US interests in the South China Sea, the Pentagon announced a decision to consolidate its forward presence "along the Pacific Rim, particularly in Southeast Asia."<sup>33</sup> The 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance stressed investing as required to ensure its ability to counter China's A2/AD capabilities.<sup>34</sup> In March 2012, the Pentagon added that, in the coming years, 60% of all US naval ships (or 186-190 vessels) will be in the Pacific, up from 52% now.<sup>35</sup> Secretary

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<sup>30</sup>Chen, "Rebalancing Act US Policy of Rebalancing," 15.

<sup>31</sup>Colleen Hanabusa, "Congress and the New Pacific Strategy—Setting Policy by Acquisition," *PacNet Newsletter*, no. 88, November 27, 2012, <http://csis.org/files/publication/Pac1288.pdf> (accessed January 2, 2013).

<sup>32</sup>Office of Secretary of Defense, ed., *Quadrennial Defense Review Report 2006*, 47, 48.

<sup>33</sup>US Department of Defense, "DOD News Briefing with Geoff Morrell from the Pentagon" (news transcript, January 26, 2011), <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4758> (accessed August 14, 2011).

<sup>34</sup>Secretary of Defense, ed., *Sustaining US Global Leadership*, 2, 4.

<sup>35</sup>Jim Wolf, "Pentagon Says Aims to Keep Asia Power Balance," *Reuters*, March 8, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/03/08/us-china-usa-pivot-idUSBRE82710N20120308> (accessed March 13, 2012). Earlier, the navy projected that 181 of its planned 313 ships, or 58% (including six CVNs), would be assigned to the Pacific Fleet; see Ronald O'Rourke, "China Naval Modernization: Implications for US Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress" (CRS Report for Congress, July 17, 2009), 27.

of Defense Leon E. Panetta reaffirmed during the 2012 Shangri-La Dialogue that by 2020 about 60% of the US fleet would be deployed there, including six aircraft carriers, a majority of cruisers, destroyers, combat ships and submarines.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, the USN will increase its presence in the Western Pacific by 20% in 2020.<sup>37</sup> With the advent of A2/AD, some may question the utility of aircraft carriers and argue that the carriers' days are numbered; yet, in the near and long future, the US Navy will still count on carriers to deliver attacks by manned or unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAVs) for the disruption of opposing operations.<sup>38</sup> In particular, in the realm of international politics, a carrier still plays an irreplaceable role in projecting forces and producing political posture in a crisis-prone region. Throwing the majority of aircraft carriers into the Pacific is a natural corollary of the rebalancing strategy.

In short, the security documents regarding national interests, policy-makers' political aspirations, strategists' security outlook, and military deployment plans altogether suggest that the US South China Sea policy serves to prevent a power transition in the Asia-Pacific, and that strategic rebalancing serves to maintain US dominance in the Pacific and reassure hegemonic stability in the South China Sea. As a result, the US Navy, as a policy instrument of the state and tool of grand strategy, has ascended to the center of the arena.

## **Naval Diplomacy in Support of Strategic Rebalancing**

### *Theoretical Role and Functions of US Naval Diplomacy*

The instances of Pax Britannica and Pax Americana indicate that naval diplomacy has a critical role to play in maintaining the world order.

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<sup>36</sup>Jonathan Marcus, "Leon Panetta: US to Deploy 60% of Navy Fleet to Pacific," *BBC*, June 2, 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-18305750> (accessed June 3, 2012).

<sup>37</sup>Jonathan Greenert, *CNO's Position Report: 2012* (Washington, D.C.: US Navy, 2012), 2.

<sup>38</sup>Henry J. Hendrix, "At What Cost a Carrier?" (Series paper, Center for a New American Security, 2013), 4-9, [http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS%20Carrier\\_Hendrix\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS%20Carrier_Hendrix_FINAL.pdf) (accessed June 15, 2013).

In early times, naval diplomacy was almost synonymous with “gunboat diplomacy”; as Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658) said: “A man of war is the best ambassador,” depicting the use of warships to compel behavior either by threatening the use of force or by taking limited military action.<sup>39</sup> However, gunboat diplomacy includes both hard and soft power, and can be used in war and nonwar scenarios. Ken Booth defined the diplomatic role of the navy as “concerned with the management of foreign policy short of actual employment of force” and postulated five basic tenets of naval diplomacy: standing demonstrations of naval power; specific operational deployments; naval aid, operational visits; and specific goodwill visits.<sup>40</sup> James Cable defined gunboat diplomacy as “the use or threat of use of limited naval force, otherwise than an act of war, in order to secure advantage or to avert loss, either in the furtherance of an international dispute or else against foreign nationals within the territory or the jurisdiction of their own state.”<sup>41</sup> According to National Intelligence Estimate, the Soviet Navy had conducted naval diplomacy through increased naval presence to facilitate the projection of Soviet power and influence, balance the Western presence, counter potential strategic threats, demonstrate support for friendly nations, and inhibit the use of hostile naval forces against Soviet allies in the Cold War era.<sup>42</sup> James M. McConnell identified some points about “Gorshkov’s doctrine of coercive naval diplomacy,” including asserting the importance of fleets-in-being at the close of wars to influence the peace negotiations and achieve political goals.<sup>43</sup> Kevin Rowlands examines classical and modern naval writings on naval diplomacy and argues that the related arguments of classical theorists such as Mahan, Corbett, and Richmond can be equated with deterrence, a show of

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<sup>39</sup>Michael Keane, ed., *Dictionary of Modern Strategy and Tactics* (Annapolis, Md.: US Naval Institute Press, 2005), 91.

<sup>40</sup>Quoted in Rowlands, “Decided Preponderance at Sea,” 97-98.

<sup>41</sup>Quoted in *ibid.*, 95.

<sup>42</sup>John B. Hattendorf and Ernest J. King, *The Evolution of the US Navy’s Maritime Strategy, 1977-1986* (Newport, R.I.: Naval War College Press, 1989), 129.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 25.

limited force, the building of a coalition, coercion, influence, and the exercise of soft power,<sup>44</sup> while Cold War naval diplomacy aimed to “maintain bipolar balance through coercion, reassurance, and image management.”<sup>45</sup> He defines naval diplomacy as “the exertion of influence on international affairs through naval power when not at war”<sup>46</sup> and concludes that forms of postmodern naval diplomacy include ballistic-missile defense at sea, theater security cooperation, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR), the enforcement of no-fly zones, forward presence, and global fleet stations.<sup>47</sup> Geoffrey Till argues that naval diplomacy is an inherently fuzzy spectrum or a continuum facilitated by naval presence to include three components: picture building, coercion (compellence and deterrence), and coalition building.<sup>48</sup> Naval diplomacy is defined by the Australian Navy as “the use of navies in support of foreign policy” and can be described as *shaping* operations; it provides context for those tasks primarily designed to influence the policies and actions of other nations. Its forms include HA/DR, defense force assistance to allied and friendly nations, presence, evacuation operations, preventative diplomacy, and coercion.<sup>49</sup>

Naval diplomacy is an instrument of foreign policy; yet, it is still intrinsically linked to the maritime strategy of the navy in concern. Although the 2007 maritime strategy, *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower* (“Cooperative Strategy” hereafter), never mentions “naval diplomacy,” the strategy reaffirms the use of seapower to influence actions and activities at sea and ashore,<sup>50</sup> which has incorporated the defi-

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<sup>44</sup>Rowlands, “Decided Preponderance at Sea,” 91, 92, 93.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>48</sup>Geoffrey Till, *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2009), 58-79, 257.

<sup>49</sup>Sea Power Centre, Royal Australian Navy, ed., *Australian Maritime Doctrine* (Canberra: Sea Power Centre, Royal Australian Navy, 2010), 109-12.

<sup>50</sup>Office of Commandant of the Marine Corps, Office of Chief of Naval Operations, and Office of Commandant of the Coast Guard, eds., *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower* (Washington, D.C.: US Navy, US Marine Corps, US Coast Guard, 2007), 8.

nition of naval diplomacy into the essence of the doctrine. In particular, its six core capabilities—forward presence, deterrence, sea control, power projection, maritime security, and HA/DR—<sup>51</sup> cover the full spectrum of naval diplomacy and highlight the centrality of naval diplomacy in maritime strategy. Moreover, the origin of the Cooperative Strategy added its credential for naval diplomacy. After the conclusion of the Cold War, the Department of Defense asserted in 1995 that there were three components in its national military strategy: peacetime engagement, deterrence and conflict prevention, and fighting and winning.<sup>52</sup> The forward-deployed naval forces were tasked to provide on-scene capabilities for executing all three components simultaneously without infringing on any nation's sovereignty.<sup>53</sup> The Navy's role in peacetime engagement was to project American influence and power abroad so as to shape the security environment, promote regional economic and political stability, and foster the flourishing of democracies, which may cooperate with the United States.<sup>54</sup> After 9/11, on the basis of having firm control of the global oceanic and littoral environment, US defense decision-makers endeavored to make the shorelines of other coastal states the frontline of America proper. The diplomatic role of the Navy grew exponentially. When Admiral Michael Mullen assumed the position of Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) (July 2005 to September 2007), he proposed the proverbial "Thousand Ship Navy" (TSN). The USN added a title—Global Maritime Partnership (GMP)—for TSN in mid-2007.<sup>55</sup> Two weeks after Mullen was promoted

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<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 12-14.

<sup>52</sup>Joint Chiefs of Staff, ed., *National Military Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1995), 4.

<sup>53</sup>Office of Chief of Naval Operations, "Forward . . . From the Sea—The Navy Operational Concept," 1997, <http://www.navy.mil/navydata/policy/fromsea/ffseanoc.html> (accessed September 23, 2007).

<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

<sup>55</sup>Chris Rahman, *The Global Maritime Partnership Initiative Implications for the Royal Australian Navy* (Canberra: Royal Australian Navy and Department of Defense, Australia, 2008), 1; Office of Chief of Naval Operations, "Global Maritime Partnerships . . . Thousand Ship Navy," 2007, <http://www.deftechforum.com/ppt/Cotton.ppt> (accessed June 14, 2007).

as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the “Cooperative Strategy” was published and enshrined as the latest maritime strategy, which supported forging GMP with the aforementioned six core capabilities. That is, the essence, core capabilities, origin and title of the “Cooperative Strategy” strongly suggest that the 2007 maritime strategy is the bona fide incarnation of naval diplomacy. Accordingly, US naval diplomacy in the South China Sea can be explored in the context provided by the cooperation-facilitating efforts of the “Cooperative Strategy.”

### *Practical Efforts and Achievements of US Naval Diplomacy*

CNO Admiral Jonathan Greenert instructs the Navy to carry out rebalancing in four ways: deploying more forces to the Asia-Pacific; basing more ships and aircraft; fielding new capabilities focused on Asia-Pacific challenges; and developing partnerships and intellectual capital across the region.<sup>56</sup> Admiral Samuel J. Locklear, Commander of USPACOM, believes the rebalance has been and continues to be about “strengthening relationships, adjusting military posture and presence, employing new concepts, capabilities and capacities” to ensure that the USN continues to effectively contribute to regional stability and security; the keys to success will thus be innovative access agreements, greatly increased exercises, rotational presence increases, and efficient force posture initiatives.<sup>57</sup> All contents of strategic rebalancing heavily rely upon the efforts of naval diplomacy.

#### 1. US-Japan Alliance

The US and Japan have for the first time included defending the principle of freedom of navigation as one of their common strategic objectives since the US-Japan “2+2” meeting in June 2011.<sup>58</sup> In September

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<sup>56</sup>Jonathan Greenert, “Sea Change: The Navy Pivots to Asia,” *Foreign Policy*, November 14, 2012, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/11/14/sea\\_change](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/11/14/sea_change).

<sup>57</sup>Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), “DOD News Briefing with Adm. Locklear from the Pentagon.”

<sup>58</sup>Office of the Spokesperson, US Department of State, “Joint Statement of the US-Japan

2011, Hillary Clinton and Japanese counterpart Foreign Minister Koichiro Gemba underscored the importance of maintaining freedom of navigation in the South China Sea.<sup>59</sup> Amid rising tensions between China and the Philippines surrounding the dispute over Scarborough Shoal, in the latest “2+2” meeting’s joint statement on April 26, 2012, the Ministers reaffirmed the need to strengthen the deterrence capabilities of the Alliance in the Asia-Pacific through Japan’s development of a dynamic defense force and enhancement of its defense posture in areas including the Southwestern Islands, and US-Japan bilateral dynamic defense cooperation (for joint training, joint surveillance and reconnaissance, as well as joint and shared use of facilities). The Ministers also identified new initiatives to strengthen cooperation: the US will help regional allies and partners to build their capacity with training and exercises, while Japan plans to take various measures including the strategic use of official development assistance such as providing coastal states with patrol boats.<sup>60</sup> Earlier, Tokyo said it is likely to provide 12 patrol boats to the Philippines.<sup>61</sup>

## 2. US-Australia Alliance

The Australian government has asserted that strategic stability in the Asia-Pacific is best underpinned by the continued US presence through its network of alliances and security partnerships with Japan, South Korea, India and Australia, and by significant levels of US military capability

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Security Consultative Committee” (media note, US Department of State, June 21, 2011), <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2011/06/166597.htm> (accessed July 16, 2012).

<sup>59</sup>Agencies, “Japan Steps into South China Sea Territorial Feud,” *Indian Express*, September 20, 2011, <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/japan-steps-into-south-china-sea-territorial-feud/849134/> (accessed July 16, 2012).

<sup>60</sup>Office of the Spokesperson, US Department of State, “Joint Statement of the Security Consultative Committee” (media note, US Department of State, April 26, 2012), <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/04/188586.htm> (accessed July 16, 2012).

<sup>61</sup>Jerry E. Esplanada, “Japan, SoKor, Australia to Help PH Improve Defense Capability—DFA,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, May 20, 2012, <http://globalnation.inquirer.net/37441/japan-sokor-australia-to-help-ph-improve-defense-capability-%E2%80%93dfa> (accessed July 15, 2012); Frances Mangosing, “Philippines to Receive 10 New Patrol Ships from Japan,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, May 18, 2012, <http://globalnation.inquirer.net/37265/philippines-to-receive-10-new-patrol-ships-from-japan> (accessed July 15, 2012).



continuing to be located in the Western Pacific.<sup>62</sup>

In mid-November 2011, President Obama announced the intention to rotate 2,500 Marines on six-month training deployments through Australia's Darwin,<sup>63</sup> which clearly indicates Canberra's adamant support of the US role in the South China Sea. Furthermore, amid rising tensions between China and the Philippines over the issue of the South China Sea, Canberra is expected to provide a number of vessels for search-and-rescue to Manila, as well as significant training for large numbers of the Filipino military personnel at home and abroad.<sup>64</sup> Australia made it clear in its Defence White Paper 2013 that it continues to enhance interoperability with the Philippines and that it has signed a Visiting Forces Agreement to enhance bilateral engagement in counter-terrorism and maritime security.<sup>65</sup> Australian scholar Benjamin Schreer argues that Canberra, as a preferred US ally, can play an aggressive role in the US AirSea Battle against China.<sup>66</sup>

### 3. US-South Korea Alliance

Although the Mutual Defense Treaty between the US and South Korea is primarily designed for coping with threats from North Korea, there are indications that South Korea could join Japan and Australia to help the Philippines boost its defense posture against China in the South China Sea. In November 2011, when asked by the Filipino President Benigno Aquino III to provide aircraft, patrol boats and other hardware to help Manila boost its military amid rising tensions with China over the Spratlys Islands, visiting South Korean President Lee Myung-bak did not

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<sup>62</sup>Australian Government, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030 (Defence White Paper 2009)* (Canberra: Department of Defence, Australian Government, 2009), 43.

<sup>63</sup>Shirley A. Kan, "Guam: US Defense Deployments" (CRS Report for Congress, 2013), 10.

<sup>64</sup>Esplanada, "Japan, SoKor, Australia to Help PH Improve Defense Capability—DFA."

<sup>65</sup>Australian Government, *Defence White Paper 2013* (Canberra: Department of Defence, Australian Government, 2013), 60.

<sup>66</sup>Benjamin Schreer, "Planning the Unthinkable War 'AirSea Battle' and Its Implications for Australia" (Strategy report, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2013), 7, 31-35, [http://robinlea.com/pub/Strategy\\_AirSea.pdf](http://robinlea.com/pub/Strategy_AirSea.pdf) (accessed June 16, 2013).

disclose any response to the specific request but said Seoul wanted to help Manila resolve its maritime problems.<sup>67</sup> Besides, Philippine Defense Undersecretary Fernando Manalo revealed in late April 2013 that South Korea is interested in bidding for the construction of two new frigates for the Philippines and might sell 12 jet fighters to the latter.<sup>68</sup>

#### 4. US-Philippines Alliance

Since late 2011, for the promotion of maritime domain awareness, the US had planned to deploy land-based P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft or unmanned broad area maritime surveillance aerial vehicles in the Philippines or Thailand.<sup>69</sup> After the dispute over the Scarborough Shoal flared up, Washington reaffirmed its commitment and obligations under the MDT in the first ever “2+2” meeting at the end of April 2012.<sup>70</sup> Philippines Defense Secretary Voltaire Gazmin believed that the MDT includes armed attacks on island territories in the Pacific.<sup>71</sup>

Besides, the US already announced its intention to talk with the Philippines about rotating surveillance aircraft or perhaps Navy ships through Philippine bases in January 2012.<sup>72</sup> In early June 2012, the Philippine government told visiting US Joint Chiefs Chairman General Martin Dempsey that the US military is again welcome to use Subic Bay and the Clark Air Base. In late April 2013, the 29th US-Philippine Balikatan

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<sup>67</sup>Esplanada, “Japan, SoKor, Australia to Help PH Improve Defense Capability—DFA.”

<sup>68</sup>Marlon Ramos, “PH Buying 2 Brand-New Warships,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, April 30, 2013, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/399539/ph-buying-2-brand-new-warships> (accessed May 26, 2013).

<sup>69</sup>Jonathan Greenert, “Navy 2025: Forward Warfighters,” *Proceedings* 137, no. 12 (December 2011), 20.

<sup>70</sup>Hillary Rodham Clinton, “Remarks with Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, Philippines Foreign Secretary Albert del Rosario, and Philippines Defense Secretary Voltaire Gazmin After Their Meeting” (US Department of State, Washington, D.C., April 30, 2012), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2012/04/188982.htm> (accessed May 4, 2012).

<sup>71</sup>Ritchie A. Horario, Jaime R. Pilapil, and Anthony Vargas, “‘Prepare for War’,” *The Manila Times*, May 10, 2012, <http://www.manilatimes.net/index.php/news/top-stories/22594-prepare-for-war> (accessed May 11, 2012).

<sup>72</sup>Ronald O’Rourke, “Navy Force Structure and Shipbuilding Plans: Background and Issues for Congress” (CRS Report for Congress, 2012), 45-46.

Exercise witnessed the return of the US Navy to Subic Bay and the Clark Air Base, opening the door for the deployment of P-8A Poseidon or unmanned broad area maritime surveillance aerial vehicles. The US even supported the Philippines with the development of regional disaster management and emergency response mechanisms.<sup>73</sup>

## 5. US-Thailand Alliance

US Under Secretary for Political Affairs William J. Burns declared in mid-2010 to expand alliance to cover not only bilateral relations, but also regional and global peace and security.<sup>74</sup> In the name of promoting maritime domain awareness, the USN planned in late 2011 to deploy its P-8A Poseidon aircraft or unmanned broad area maritime surveillance aerial vehicles to Thailand.<sup>75</sup> The Pentagon also discussed with Thailand about creating a regional disaster/relief hub at U-Tapao, an American-built airfield that housed B-52 bombers during the Vietnam War, and was interested in more naval visits to Thai ports and joint surveillance flights to monitor trade routes and military movements.<sup>76</sup> The stationing of P-8A Poseidon there is in order to conduct anti-submarine warfare in the South China Sea. Although the US finally opted for the Philippines for the creation of a regional disaster/relief hub, there are still possibilities for the consolidation of the US-Thailand Alliance in the current amicable atmosphere.

## 6. US-India Strategic Partnership

In late 2011, the Indian Navy demonstrated a strong intention to intervene in the South China Sea by announcing to station there, provide a

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<sup>73</sup>Armed Forces of the Philippines, "30 Aircraft, 3 Vessels Deployed for Balikatan 2013," *Noodls.com*, April 3, 2013, <http://www.noodls.com/view/7AF373F2E9542424EC1FF6EB6B295606CCADC2279807xxx1364972406> (accessed May 23, 2013).

<sup>74</sup>US Department of State, "A Renewed U.S.-Thai Alliance for the 21st Century" (remarks by William J. Burns, Bangkok, Thailand, July 16, 2012), <http://www.state.gov/p/us/rm/2010/144774.htm> (accessed December 12, 2012).

<sup>75</sup>Greenert, "Navy 2025: Forward Warfighters," 20.

<sup>76</sup>Craig Whitlock, "US Seeks Return to Southeast Asia Bases," *The Washington Post*, June 23, 2012, A01.

naval base to the Vietnamese Navy for its training, and leverage bilateral naval cooperation to counterbalance the so-called China's string-of-pearls strategy.<sup>77</sup> This measure does not come as a surprise. China's involvement in the development of Gwadar Port and participation in an anti-pirate mission in the Gulf of Eden have been seen by India as the PLA Navy's extension into the western Indian Ocean and an attempt to collaborate with Pakistan to foil India's maritime ambition. Therefore, New Delhi's association with Hanoi in the South China Sea is designed to impede Beijing's freedom of action in the Indian Ocean.

As Leon Panetta visited New Delhi in early June 2012, he repeated strategic rebalancing and called for deepening bilateral defense and security cooperation: "In particular, we will expand our military partnerships and our presence in the arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean Region and South Asia. Defense cooperation with India is a linchpin in this strategy."<sup>78</sup> Of all the partners involved in the US-dominated joint exercises in the Asia-Pacific, India is the most active participant in terms of both frequency and scale.<sup>79</sup> US-Indian naval cooperation will be supposedly realigned toward the South China Sea.

## 7. Emerging US-Vietnam Strategic Partnership

In August 2010, amid escalating tensions in the South China Sea, the US destroyer USS John S. McCain conducted a four-day exchange program with the Vietnamese navy, featuring mostly sporting and musical events. In 2011, the US and Vietnam signed a landmark Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) which covers issues such as exchange of high-ranking dialogues, search and rescue (SAR), peacekeeping operations of the UN, military management, and HA/DR. The US and Vietnam launched a series

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<sup>77</sup>JAISSWAL, "India Invited by Vietnam to South China Sea," *Indian Defence Forum*, June, 2011, <http://defenceforumindia.com/military-strategy/23019-india-invited-vietnam-south-china-sea.html> (accessed July 22, 2011).

<sup>78</sup>"Leon Panetta Calls for Closer Defence Ties with India," *BBC*, June 6, 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-18336854> (accessed July 17, 2012).

<sup>79</sup>Personal communication with a senior Indian diplomat attending a closed-door seminar in Taipei in mid-2013.

of naval exchanges confined to noncombat training in mid-2011. In late April 2012, amid tensions between China and the Philippines concerning the dispute over Scarborough Shoal, the US and Vietnam held a five-day-long joint naval drill to practice salvage and disaster training.<sup>80</sup>

Over the past two years, Vietnam has opened its facility to US logistics ships for repairs. Vietnam has repaired only non-combat US Maritime Sealift Command vessels at commercial facilities in Cam Ranh Bay. Panetta said in early June 2012 that Cam Ranh Bay was critical for the USN to move its ships from America's West Coast to ports or stations in the Pacific; "access for United States naval ships into this facility is a key component" of the US relationship with Vietnam, "and we see the tremendous potential" for future cooperation between the US and Vietnam.<sup>81</sup> His Vietnamese counterpart General Phung Quang Thanh indicated during the Q&A session that Vietnam would promote bilateral cooperation with the US "without doing harm to any third parties" and that visits to Cam Ranh Bay by US Navy warships was not an immediate prospect. Overall, it can be argued that Vietnam will cooperate with the US but not align with it.<sup>82</sup> The Vietnamese response may be concluded as a policy of "three no's": no foreign bases, no use of Vietnamese territory against a third country, and no military alliance. Currently, Vietnam is stepping up naval cooperation with Russia in the strategic Cam Ranh Bay.

Vietnam's assertion of "three no's" and naval cooperation with Russia may be disappointing to the US Navy; however, the five priority areas enumerated in the MOU still look promising. Bilateral military cooperation may well be advanced to combat nature in due time, especially when it comes to military operations other than war (MOOTW), as to be explored below.

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<sup>80</sup>"Vietnam Begins Naval Exercises with the US," *The Telegraph*, April 23, 2012.

<sup>81</sup>"Pentagon Seeks Return to Long-Abandoned Military Port in Vietnam," *Los Angeles Times*, June 3, 2012.

<sup>82</sup>Carlyle A. Thayer, "Hanoi and the Pentagon: A Budding Courtship," *US Naval Institute*, June 11, 2012, <http://www.usni.org/news-analysis/hanoi-and-pentagon-budding-courtship> (accessed June 16, 2013).

*General Strategic Posture in the Asia-Pacific/South China Sea*

Apparently, the physical efforts and achievements have echoed the functions of naval diplomacy across the full spectrum and have indicated that the US Navy is relentlessly executing the leadership's instruction regarding strategic rebalancing.

As tension rose in the South China Sea, the USN launched the "Pacific Partnership 2012" to visit Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam and Cambodia to provide medical, dental and other services to the people. A total of 16 countries participated in the largest ever annual humanitarian and civic assistance mission in the region, including Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines,<sup>83</sup> all locked in a territorial dispute with China. Japan's mainstream news media NHK said the mission was to contain China in the South China Sea.<sup>84</sup> Likewise, "Rim Pacific 2012"—the largest ever in the RIMPAC series—attracted 22 participating countries. "Pacific Partnership 2012" and "Rim Pacific 2012" are just two of many examples of US success in consolidating diplomatic and military partnerships with regional countries.

This does not mean that US strategic rebalancing has coasted along in East Asia without raising doubts and resistance. As David C. Kang observed, a few respected regional leaders have expressed their concerns and even opposed Asian stability to be cast by America and its application of military force.<sup>85</sup> In particular, Australia's former Deputy Secretary for Defence (Strategy and Policy) Hugh White argued that China will become more powerful than the US around 2030, first economically and then militarily, that the US must share power with China while "surrendering

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<sup>83</sup>Rey Gerilla Grado, "Different Nationalities Participate in the Pacific Partnership 2012," *Leyte Samar Daily Express*, June 25, 2012, <http://leytesamardaily.net/2012/06/different-nationalities-participate-in-the-pacific-partnership-2012/> (accessed July 17, 2012).

<sup>84</sup>"Medical Support Is Conducted by Philippines, Japan's Self-Defense Forces and So On" (originally in Japanese), *NHK*, June 19, 2012, <http://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20120619/k10015945601000.html> (accessed June 19, 2012).

<sup>85</sup>David C. Kang, "Is America Listening to Its East Asian Allies? Hugh White's *The China Choice*," *PacNet Newsletter*, no. 64, October 18, 2012, <http://csis.org/files/publication/Pac1264.pdf> (accessed October 19, 2012).

primacy and all that goes with it.”<sup>86</sup> In this sense, strategic rebalancing could be a recipe for war. However, Beijing’s assertiveness continues to help the advances of US strategic rebalancing. Increasing joint exercises and expanding participants attest to regional support of US South China Sea policy and strategic rebalancing. If the signing of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) in 2002 symbolized the appearance of the “ASEAN+China” mechanism,<sup>87</sup> the mechanism is being eroded by the looming US-dominated neo-realistic framework. Although most countries in Southeast Asia have taken a balanced strategy between the US and China, that China signaled its willingness to discuss a Code of Conduct (COC) for the South China Sea, a long-awaited action item stipulated in the DOC, is the very example of China’s passive response to the newly-added dynamics brought about by a growing US presence in the region. China’s acceptance of former Secretary of Defense Panetta’s invitation to join RIMPAC 2014 is another example,<sup>88</sup> which on the one hand indicates America’s confidence in shaping the security environment and, on the other hand, it indicates China’s need to cater to the new mainstream facilitated by US naval diplomacy. Accordingly, the landscape of international relations in the region is tipping in favor of the US.

### **Progress of Naval Diplomacy/Maritime Strategy in the SCS**

The creditability of US naval diplomacy in the South China Sea ultimately rests upon the progress of the Navy’s maritime strategy in the region.

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<sup>86</sup>Carlyle A. Thayer, “China’s Rise and the Passing of U.S. Primacy: Australia Debates Its Future,” *Asia Policy*, no. 12 (July 2011): 22-23.

<sup>87</sup>In the late 1990s, China played a dominant role in the South China Sea issue, while member states of ASEAN attempted to employ the bloc’s collective power to deal with Beijing. The engagement between ASEAN and China is defined as “ASEAN+China” in this paper.

<sup>88</sup>China’s participation will be limited to maritime security, military medicine and HA/DR, due to restrictions in the National Defense Authorization Act 2000. The law prohibits the Pentagon from any military contacts with the PLA if it could “create a national security risk due to an inappropriate exposure” to activities including joint exercises. Yet, operations or exercises related to SAR and HA/DR are exempt from the law.

*Agenda, Contents & Mechanism of the US Maritime Strategy*

When Michael Mullen proposed TSN, he meant to extend the US Navy's sea control capabilities to the *rivers, harbors, and shorelines* of other coastal states.<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, under Mullen's tutelage, the Navy Expeditionary Combat Command (NECC) was formally established in early 2006 for "*landward push*" of sea control.<sup>90</sup> The argument, landward push of sea control to the rivers, harbors, and shorelines of coastal states to empower the Navy to operate beyond the littoral, is termed Mullenism in this paper.<sup>91</sup> By fathering the 2007 Maritime Strategy, Mullen has left a valuable legacy for his successors. As sea control remains at the heart of maritime strategy,<sup>92</sup> Mullenism resides at the core of the 2007 Maritime Strategy.

As of now, NECC has evolved to integrate elements such as Riverine Forces, Global Fleet Stations (GFS), and littoral combat ships (LCS). NECC is tasked to facilitate the expansion of these elements around the world for realizing the landward push of sea control in the name of conducting comprehensive irregular warfare (IW), such as riverine warfare, maritime security operations, medical and dental services, engineering and construction, provincial reconstruction, legal operations, civic assistance, disaster relief, counter-piracy, enhancing regional awareness, and building maritime partner capability and capacity.<sup>93</sup> Many IW efforts fall into the field of MOOTW, or nonwar scenarios of naval diplomacy. Realistically, decision makers can use exchangeable combat and noncombat

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<sup>89</sup>Michael G. Mullen, "Remarks as Delivered by Adm. Mike Mullen," *US Navy*, <http://www.navy.mil/navydata/cno/speeches/mullen050831.txt> (accessed October 15, 2007). Emphasis is my own.

<sup>90</sup>Michael F. Galli et al., *Riverine Sustainment 2012* (Monterey: Naval Postgraduate School, 2007), xix, 1, 3. Emphasis is my own.

<sup>91</sup>The term "Mullenism" is coined by the author of this paper.

<sup>92</sup>Geoffrey Till, "New Directions in Maritime Strategy? Implications for the US Navy," *Naval War College Review* 60, no. 4 (Autumn 2007): 31.

<sup>93</sup>Ronald O'Rourke, *Navy Irregular Warfare and Counterterrorism Operations: Background and Issues for Congress (December 2011)* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 2011), 1-3, 10.



MOOTW as dual tracks for shaping the security environment.<sup>94</sup> With the philanthropic show of the most noble side of power, or benign application of seapower, MOOTW such as HA/DR and civic assistance missions help the US Navy improve its image and win the battle for hearts and minds in strategically important countries.<sup>95</sup> One of the missions included in the 2007 Maritime Strategy is to win the battle for hearts and minds,<sup>96</sup> and one of the missions designed for the NECC is to conduct the hearts and minds campaign.

According to the Department of the Navy, because NECC is capable of providing a full spectrum of operations, it has become a key element of the Navy's irregular warfare; it is integral to the execution of the six core capabilities of maritime strategy and to the integration of naval capabilities from blue water into green and brown water, and in direct support of the Joint Force.<sup>97</sup> Consequently, NECC is the core operational mechanism of naval diplomacy/Maritime Strategy.

#### *Link between "AirSea Battle" and Maritime Strategy/Navy Diplomacy*

The biggest threat to America's maritime hegemony in the Asia-Pacific comes from the so-called multilayered A2/AD capabilities of China. To address this problem, as mentioned earlier, the 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance lays stress on investing as required to counter China's A2/AD capabilities, which means to implement "AirSea Battle." Australian scholar Benjamin Schreer argues that AirSea Battle could contribute to regional stability by promoting deterrence in Sino-US strategic affairs,<sup>98</sup> a classic

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<sup>94</sup>Wen-lung Laurence Lin, "The U.S. Maritime Strategy in the Asia-Pacific in Response to the Rise of a Seafaring China," *Issues & Studies* 48, no. 4 (December 2012): 204-5.

<sup>95</sup>Michael G. Mullen, "What I Believe: Eight Tenets That Guide My Vision for the 21st Century Navy," *Proceedings* 132, no. 235 (January 2006): 13; Till, "New Directions in Maritime Strategy?" 36; Rahman, *The Global Maritime Partnership*, 25; Charles M. Perry et al., *Finding the Right Mix Disaster Diplomacy, National Security, and International Cooperation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, 2009), 84.

<sup>96</sup>Mullen, "Remarks as Delivered by Adm. Mike Mullen"; Galli et al., *Riverine Sustainment 2012*, 157.

<sup>97</sup>Ronald O'Rourke, "Navy Irregular Warfare and Counterterrorism Operations: Background and Issues for Congress" (CRS Report for Congress, October 2012), 10.

<sup>98</sup>Schreer, "Planning the Unthinkable War," 6.

echo to the philosophy of hegemonic stability.

“AirSea Battle” is a concept developed by the Pentagon to adopt a more integrated approach for joint operations between the US Navy and Air Force. The basic concept of AirSea Battle is that having withstood the initial attack, the US will execute a blinding campaign against PLA command and control networks, which will be followed by a missile suppression campaign against China’s land-based systems, and a distant blockade against Chinese merchant ships in the Malacca Strait and elsewhere.<sup>99</sup> The AirSea Battle is in fact a very forward-deployed strategy which may need Air Force ground attack jets or LCSs to defend main battleships tasked for the destruction of China’s A2/AD capabilities from PLAN’s small-boat “swarm” attacks.<sup>100</sup> The AirSea Battle concept thus suggests increasing dependence on the US weaponry system, maritime intelligence-collection system, and network-centric warfare system deployed along the waters surrounding China, all of which in turn rely on the extensive partnerships-weaving efforts of the NECC.

The USPACOM uses its high-payoff engagement programs such as Pacific Partnership and Pacific Angel<sup>101</sup> to mobilize its amphibious warships such as transport dock (LPD) and dock landing ship (LSD) for missions including community relations projects, engineering and infrastructural repairs, medical care for local patients, and civic action proj-

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<sup>99</sup>Jan van Tol et al., *AirSea Battle: A Point-of-Departure Operational Concept* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2010), xiii, xv; Schreer, “Planning the Unthinkable War,” 5.

<sup>100</sup>Bill Gertz, “Pentagon Battle Concept Has Cold War Posture on China,” *Washington Times*, November 9, 2011; Martin N. Murphy, *Littoral Combat Ship: An Examination of Its Possible Concepts of Operation* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2010), 4, 30-34. LCS will be a theater-based asset designed to counter enemy access-denial weapons; LCS units will also be attached to strike groups as required to provide enhanced protection when operating near shore. See Naval War College, ed., *Joint Military Operations Reference Guide* (Newport, R.I.: US Navy, 2011), 14.

<sup>101</sup>Senate Armed Services Committee, “Statement of Admiral Robert F. Willard, US Navy Commander, US Pacific Command, before the Senate Armed Services Committee on Appropriations on US Pacific Command Posture” (Statement, US Senate, Washington, D.C., February 28, 2012), 21-22.

ects.<sup>102</sup> These amphibious warships are optimal commanding platforms for Global Fleet Stations,<sup>103</sup> which are designed for the purpose of establishing persistent sea bases of operations in key worldwide locations to interact with partner nation's military and civilian populations and the global maritime community.<sup>104</sup> The missions conducted by these amphibious warships are actually irregular warfare operations and MOOTW of NECC. That is, NECC is weaving a favorable operational environment for the US Navy and paving the way for AirSea Battle to work out when necessary. This proves that NECC plays a critical role in exemplifying versatile naval diplomacy so as to realize Mullenism and serve AirSea Battle against China in the Asia-Pacific.

#### *Edification of the 2012 US-Philippine Balikatan Exercise*

The Balikatan exercise was held annually between the US and the Philippines since 1981 and was designed to enhance the militaries' combined planning, combat readiness and interoperability. After 9/11, HA/DR and civil assistance (provision of medical/dental/veterinary services, small-scale infrastructure projects such as roads, school buildings, and water wells) have become more prominent in Balikatan; even the training conducted under Balikatan has moved into non-traditional areas such as maritime operations against piracy, drug smuggling, disaster response; and peace enforcement.<sup>105</sup>

Amid the deteriorating standoff between Chinese and Philippine maritime forces at the Scarborough Shoal, America and the Philippines held the 28<sup>th</sup> Balikatan exercise from April 16 to 27, 2012. The exercise consisted of computer-simulated command post exercises (CPX) in Manila, multiple field training exercises (FTX), and medical, veterinary,

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<sup>102</sup>Ibid.

<sup>103</sup>Naval War College, ed., *Joint Military Operations Reference Guide*, 8.

<sup>104</sup>Murphy, *Littoral Combat Ship*, 41; Galli et al., *Riverine Sustainment 2012*, 18, 179-80.

<sup>105</sup>Rosalie Arcala Hall, "Boots on Unstable Ground: Democratic Governance of the Armed Forces under Post 9/11 US-Philippine Military Relations," *Asia-Pacific Social Science Review* 10, no. 2 (2010): 31.

and engineering humanitarian and civic assistance (HCA) projects. This exercise was unique in that it was the first time that Balikatan included multilateral engagement: an additional 20 participants from ASEAN and 15 colleagues from partner nations, including Japan, Korea and Australia, joined the CPX. In the FTX, approximately 4,500 US marines and 2,300 Filipino counterparts conducted combat maneuvers including the mock retaking of an oil rig supposedly seized by terrorists in offshore areas near northwestern Palawan where the Philippine government had invited foreign investors to explore for oil and gas. The HCA activities included the construction of five schools and provision of medical and dental care to more than 22,000 people.<sup>106</sup> Although US and Philippine officials said that this exercise would not focus on any nation as an adversary, Philippine military chief Gen. Jessie Dellosa stressed at the opening ceremony that the Balikatan exercises were timely “given the international situation we are in” and that “it is during these times that our alliances must be reaffirmed.”<sup>107</sup> During an interview about the exercise, Lieutenant General Duane Thiessen, Commander of US Marine Forces–Pacific, assured that “the mutual defense treaty guarantees we get involved in each other’s defenses.” In the first ever “2+2” meeting right after the exercise, Hillary Clinton reaffirmed America’s commitment and obligations under the mutual defense treaty, as mentioned earlier.

Much edification can be derived from the exercise. Firstly, additional participants from ASEAN and outside powers in the CPX were kind of an examination of the fruits of US naval diplomacy. The desirable attendance indicated Washington’s preliminary success in winning regional

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<sup>106</sup>US Embassy Manila, “Balikatan Combined Exercise Returns to the Philippines,” (news release, U.S. Department of State, March 7, 2012), <http://manila.usembassy.gov/balikatan2012pr.html> (accessed April 30, 2012); Associated Press, “United States and Philippines: Balikatan 2012 Military Exercise” (news posted on the forum of *Pakistan Defence*, April 17, 2012), <http://www.defence.pk/forums/americas/173550-united-states-philippines-balikatan-2012-military-exercise.html> (accessed April 30, 2012); Mike Mears, “Balikatan 2012 Officially Begins,” *US Marine Corps*, April, 2012, <http://www.mcipac.marines.mil/News/NewsArticleDisplay/tabid/1144/Article/8942/balikatan-2012-officially-begins.aspx> (accessed April 23, 2012).

<sup>107</sup>Associated Press, “United States and Philippines.”

support for the US-dominated neo-realistic framework. Secondly, the exercise exemplified the efforts of the NECC through low-intensity irregular warfare operations and MOOTW. The HCA activities indicated that the US is consolidating its foothold on the soil of the Philippines and realizing Mullenism along the shoreline of the South China Sea. Thirdly, the FTX revealed that the US is reorienting regional defense cooperation toward high-intensity military operations against China such as oil rig- or island-retaking. The FTX is therefore paving the context for AirSea Battle in the South China Sea. Fourthly, that Washington reasserted its commitment to the MDT indicates its determination to act as a counterweight against China in the South China Sea, which emboldens other claimants to challenge the position of Beijing and encourages outside powers to intervene in South China Sea affairs; eventually, such developments will justify innovative access agreements, greatly increased exercises, rotational presence increases, and efficient force posture initiatives, all key components for the success of strategic rebalancing. In short, the US Navy handled the exercise with diplomatic tact and finesse to insinuate Mullenism into the South China Sea, advance AirSea Battle, facilitate strategic rebalancing, and support its South China Sea policy.

#### *Strategic Implications for the South China Sea*

Balikatan is just one of around a score of US-dominated military exercises in the Asia-Pacific annually. These exercises along with “Pacific Partnership” and “Rim Pacific” use the same mechanism and serve the same Maritime strategy. Some trends about the developments of the NECC deserve further attention. First of all, the US Navy has created the Coastal Riverine Force (CORIVFOR) in mid-2012 to further specialize in operating in the green and brown waters, bridge the gap between traditional Navy blue water operations and land-based forces, and protect vital waterways, high value assets and maritime infrastructure; the Coastal Riverine Force will reach its full operational capability in late 2014.<sup>108</sup> Secondly,

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<sup>108</sup>O'Rourke, “Navy Irregular Warfare,” 11-12.

the US Navy announced in September 2012 that it would develop Ship to Shore Connectors (SSC) to ultimately phase out all of the seventy-two landing craft air cushions (LCAC) which have proved invaluable in support of HA/DR missions. The contractor Textron group is supposed to deliver 9 SSCs for sea trial before 2020.<sup>109</sup> SSC will be very instrumental in upgrading the efficiency of achieving landward push of sea control. Thirdly, among the future total of 310-316 ships, there will be thirty-two amphibious warfare ships and fifty-five LCSs.<sup>110</sup> As these projected GFS primary station/command ships join the order of battle one after another, the US navy's philanthropic activities will increase remarkably. Fourthly, the US Navy has established NECC Pacific (NECC PAC) in late 2012 to formalize a direct administrative relationship between NECC and the Commander of the Pacific Fleet.<sup>111</sup> It suggests that PACOM will expand its use of the NECC to realize Mullenism through MOOTW and advance AirSea Battle in the crisis-prone South China Sea, in particular. These trends will help the NECC consolidate its foothold in the South China Sea.

The US may drive its naval diplomacy and strategic rebalancing further ahead. There are suggestions that the US lend the weight of its air and naval forces to regional allies' ground forces,<sup>112</sup> help Southeast Asian nations focus their contribution to the AirSea Battle concept and develop regional mini A2/AD complexes to hedge against China,<sup>113</sup> and help ASEAN partners to build up their maritime defense and detection capabilities to provide for a more common operational picture in the South China

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<sup>109</sup>Chief of Naval Operations, ed., *U.S. Navy Program Guide 2012* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Navy, 2012), 90; Matthew Potter, "New Air Cushion Landing Craft Program Continues with Award to Rolls-Royce," *Defense Procurement News*, November 11, 2012, <http://www.defenseprocurementnews.com/topics/services/navy/> (accessed December 10, 2012).

<sup>110</sup>O'Rourke, "Navy Force Structure," 1, 2, 9, 12, 13.

<sup>111</sup>O'Rourke, "Navy Irregular Warfare," 10.

<sup>112</sup>Gertz, "Pentagon Battle Concept."

<sup>113</sup>Jim Thomas, "Testimony: China's Active Defense Strategy and Its Regional Implications" (testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Washington, D.C., January 28, 2011), 4-5.

Sea.<sup>114</sup> This implies that the PACOM could commit NECC-underpinned naval diplomacy to the enhancement of interoperability of combined operations between the US and its defense partners. In 2013, the US Navy has returned to Subic Bay and the Clark Air Base. This will greatly help the advances of the Maritime Strategy in the South China Sea.

If Beijing fails to discern the agenda, contents, operational mechanism, and progress of the US Maritime strategy, it could miscalculate the creditability of America's naval diplomacy and strategic rebalancing, and misjudge America's determination to carry out its South China Sea policy. Eventually, Beijing may pursue maritime prowess only to be confronted by a balancing coalition spearheaded by America.

## **Conclusion**

Washington's South China Sea policy serves to prevent power transition in the Asia-Pacific, while its strategic rebalancing serves to maintain US dominance in the Pacific and reassure hegemonic stability in the South China Sea. As a result, the US naval diplomacy has attracted the limelight of international politics.

Theoretically, the 2007 maritime strategy is the incarnation of naval diplomacy. Practically, the Navy leaderships' instructions regarding the execution of strategic rebalancing heavily depend on naval diplomacy. The US Navy is relentlessly executing strategic rebalancing and has secured preliminary success. Consequently, the DOC-symbolized "ASEAN+China" mechanism has been replaced by the US-dominated neo-realistic framework, and the landscape of international relations in the South China Sea has been transformed.

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<sup>114</sup>John McCain, "Remarks by Senator John McCain at the Center for Strategic and International Studies Conference on Maritime Security in the South China Sea" (remarks by Senator John McCain, US Senate, June 20, 2011), [http://www.mccain.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?FuseAction=PressOffice.Speeches&ContentRecord\\_id=af2b3a40-cd28-aa40-64e3-8102b2bb3601&Region\\_id=&Issue\\_id=f9a5665a-b73f-42fc-91d0-ab93a2876f4c](http://www.mccain.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?FuseAction=PressOffice.Speeches&ContentRecord_id=af2b3a40-cd28-aa40-64e3-8102b2bb3601&Region_id=&Issue_id=f9a5665a-b73f-42fc-91d0-ab93a2876f4c) (accessed March 17, 2012).

The creditability of naval diplomacy in the South China Sea ultimately rests upon the progress of the maritime strategy in the Asia-Pacific. Mullenism resides at the core of the Maritime Strategy, of which the core operational mechanism is the NECC. The US AirSea Battle concept against China's A2/AD capabilities suggests increasing dependence on the efforts of the NECC. Assigned to conduct various irregular warfare operations and MOOTW, NECC plays a critical role in exemplifying versatile naval diplomacy. Currently, NECC is weaving a favorable operational environment for the US Navy and paving the way for AirSea Battle to work out in case of war. Much edification can be derived from the 2012 Balikatan exercise; overall, with the help of NECC's naval diplomacy, the US Navy has insinuated Mullenism into the South China Sea, advanced AirSea Battle, facilitated strategic rebalancing, and reassured its South China Sea policy. The return of the US Navy to Subic Bay and the Clark Air Base will further the advances of the Maritime Strategy in the South China Sea.

Beijing's failure to fully comprehend the progress of the US maritime deployment and increasing assertiveness in sovereignty disputes may lead itself to strenuously wrestle with a far superior balancing coalition being created by the United States.

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