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## Trump and Southeast Asia: Sustaining the Maritime Pivot

**The new administration needs to rethink deterrence in the South China Sea.**

By Koh Swee Lean Collin  
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A watered-down mention of the South China Sea (SCS) disputes in the final Chairman's Statement of the just-concluded 30th Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summit adds to the mixed record of how the ten-member regional bloc deals with this problem. This should not come across as surprising, especially to those who have long observed discernible patterns in the way ASEAN intramural dynamics play out when confronted with such thorny security issues, notwithstanding the bloc having long touted itself to be in the driver's seat of the Asia-Pacific architecture. But more importantly, it should also prompt outside actors, particularly the United States now under President Donald Trump, to reexamine their strategies on the South China Sea.

### Forget About ASEAN Unity

What Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has said about the feeling of helplessness toward China's SCS moves – particularly its land reclamation and militarization – may not sound endearing to many who seek justice against the blatant use of might to assert one's interests at

the expense of others. But it does have a kernel of truth. The time to stop Beijing passed the moment it started dredging up the coral reefs; those islands constitute a *fait accompli* by Beijing that ASEAN must live with.

Hence, the final ASEAN statement merely regurgitated the bloc's usual choices of words when addressing the thorny SCS problem – harping on the rule of law, and urging everyone to maintain peace and stability. Yet these boilerplate phrases do not usually contribute much beyond mere emphasis of what has long been mentioned in past statements. At a deeper level, besides the political wrangling behind the scenes, including reported lobbying by the Chinese, this outcome reflects the helplessness of some ASEAN member states when confronted with hard realities.

First, China is a geographical fact – ASEAN countries simply do not get to choose neighbors; therefore, they must try to coexist peacefully with China. Second, every ASEAN country – including all SCS claimants – is a trade partner of Beijing, and several of them are heavily dependent on it for aid and investment. This is especially true when delivering socioeconomic goods to domestic constituencies for political legitimacy far outweighs the need to engage in unnecessary diplomatic and potentially even armed confrontations with a much larger and more powerful neighbor. Duterte, along with his Malaysian counterpart, Najib Razak, count as such examples.

Third, ASEAN is divided to begin with, since each member state perceives and balances the SCS issue with its national interests differently. Non-claimants such as Cambodia and Laos do not wish to allow an issue that does not directly affect them to hijack their broader diplomatic and economic relations with – or rather, reliance on – China. ASEAN unity may not even be part of their strategic calculations. Beijing's undeclared economic retaliation against Seoul over its installation of the Terminal High Altitude Air Defense (THAAD) system may remind potential ASEAN dissenters to toe their line carefully. ASEAN disunity over China's SCS moves is thus a reality.

Therefore, it might well be a mischaracterization to say ASEAN has “softened” against Beijing, since it never hardened its stance in the first place. Given those immutable geographical and intramural realities, all ASEAN can do is to latch onto a tried-and-tested formula. By serving as a platform that fosters dialogue and practical security cooperation, ASEAN seeks to maintain its relevance through managing, not resolving, the SCS disputes and keep tensions from spiraling into armed hostilities – no more than that. Most, if not all, member states recognize this. Strategic hedging between China and other extra-regional powers will remain the order of the day.

Notably, for instance, even as he chased after Chinese economic goodies, and despite his fiery anti-U.S. rhetoric, Duterte is keen to keep the bilateral alliance card close to his chest. Likewise, not long after visiting Beijing in late 2016, Najib proceeded to Tokyo and New Delhi, where he secured the hosts' investments and further maritime security cooperation. ASEAN governments generally agree that, in accordance with the “ASEAN Way” stressing inclusivity, the more extra-regional powers are involved, the merrier it is. Therefore, it is not difficult to see them

maintaining the view that the United States continues to serve an invaluable role as a stabilizing force in the region.

### **Trump's Murky Southeast Asia Agenda**

After looking upon the previous Barack Obama administration's Asia "pivot" with a greater ease of certainty, ASEAN leaders have watched President Donald Trump with trepidation, especially when he appeared keen to focus on close allies and partners, such as Japan and South Korea.

If anything, Trump appears most interested in addressing the North Korean threat, which is allegedly the reason he recently reached out to ASEAN countries such as Singapore and Thailand. Beyond that, nowhere has Southeast Asia featured on Trump's agenda toward the Asia-Pacific, notwithstanding Vice President Mike Pence's recent announcement that the president would visit the region for a series of summits. Trump's "unwavering commitment" was certainly emphasized by U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson when he met his ASEAN counterparts. Unless there is a clearer demonstration of resolve, this may have little effect on assuaging concerns in Southeast Asia.

In fact, Trump's pulling out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) dashed hopes amongst strong ASEAN proponents of the proposed initiative, such as Singapore and Vietnam, for a holistic U.S. engagement through augmenting its security commitment with a more robust economic presence. As it stands, regional governments have little choice but to move on with alternative economic integration pathways, such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and a TPP variant sans US participation. They will also eye potential economic benefits from China's Belt and Road Initiative even if there is skepticism about Beijing's broader strategic intent.

Given this development, one would expect a stronger U.S. security commitment to the Asia-Pacific. In fact, following the TPP pull-out, Admiral Harry Harris, chief of U.S. Pacific Command, emphasized this aspect. Perhaps one should use the word "pivot" carefully, since the Trump administration has dropped this label. Still, the incumbent's policy may be one emphasizing status quo, and therefore a "pivot" in substance albeit not in name, as some have observed. The question is how this status quo can be tangibly sustained. It is one thing to show face ASEAN-related regional forums, and quite another to translate that engagement into action.

### **Playing Into China's Hands?**

If Trump intends to make Southeast Asia a key component of his Asia-Pacific policy, then Washington needs to demonstrate credibility – a key criterion for deterrence and coercion. However, the notion of deterrence/coercion requires rethink and recalibration, especially when it comes to preventing acts of aggression at the lower levels in the case of the SCS disputes. Beijing would find little logical sense in going to war with Washington, not when immense domestic political and economic stakes are involved. Below this threshold, China may utilize other ways to further its interests.

The Chinese Coast Guard and the fabled fishing militia have become Beijing's leading agencies for exercising active deterrence/coercion in and over the SCS, whereas the PLA Navy looms in

the shadows as a form of “recessed deterrence.” The Scarborough Shoal and Second Thomas Shoal count as recent shining examples of how Beijing’s approach has reaped strategic benefits.

By contrast, the forward-deployed presence of the U.S. Navy, a lynchpin of American defense and security commitment to the Asia-Pacific, has served such functions – in, for example, the intervention of a pair of carrier strike groups (CSGs) during the Taiwan Strait crisis in the 1990s; and most recently, the dispatch of the USS *Carl Vinson* to the Korean Peninsula in response to Pyongyang’s belligerence (albeit after a bit of a delay). These are Northeast Asian examples, with a geopolitical context which is vastly different from that in the SCS.

A better example is that of the much-ballyhooed U.S. Navy freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs). For one, FONOPs using an Aegis destroyer bristling with offensive armaments would be deemed an overkill by some ASEAN governments, and advantages Beijing. First, China could use FONOPs by high-powered “grey hulls” to paint the United States as “aggressor,” thereby feeding its broader strategic narrative of victimization. Second, it offers ready ammunition for Beijing to justify further militarization in the name of “defensive preparations.”

The watered-down SCS mention in the statement could be attributed to ASEAN’s intent not to agitate Beijing, which would imperil progress toward promulgating a Code of Conduct by end of 2017. This also implies that certain ASEAN member states would possibly resist any U.S. moves – including FONOPs – that they may label “unconstructive” toward achieving this aim. For example, in October 2015, after the U.S. Navy destroyer USS *Lassen* conducted the first FONOP within 12 nautical miles of Subi Reef, Indonesian Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal and Security Affairs Luhut Pandjaitan remarked: “We disagree, we don’t like any power projection... Have you ever heard of power projection solving problems?”

### **Overstretched for a Vast Asia-Pacific**

Even if Trump has the will to continue the practice of FONOPs in the SCS as a matter of principle, it begs the question of whether this is feasible from an operational standpoint.

In November 2015, a U.S. defense official said that the Navy plans to conduct patrols within 12 nautical miles of the artificial islands about twice a quarter to remind China and other countries about U.S. rights under international law. The official added, “That’s the right amount to make it regular but not a constant poke in the eye.” But scarcely a month later, plans to conduct a second FONOP in December as part of this scheme to regularize the operations were called off. Following the *Lassen* FONOP, sister ship *Curtis Wilbur* did the second such operations in late January 2016, not long after Admiral Harris promised more of such operations. The third FONOP was planned in April 2016 and carried out the following month by the *William P. Lawrence*. The fourth was conducted by the *Decatur* in October the same year.

Taken altogether, this total number falls short of the envisaged twice-a-quarter frequency. With so many security issues to deal with in the vast Asia-Pacific, one wonders whether the U.S. Navy is too overstretched to achieve this tempo. There are just not sufficient assets to deploy wherever and whenever required, thereby impinging upon U.S. credibility.

The recent gaffe over the *Carl Vinson* CSG is illustrative, especially when it affects an ally's perception of U.S. security commitment. The jingoistic Chinese tabloid *Global Times* chimed in: "The truth seems to be that the U.S. military and president jointly created fake news and it is without doubt a rare scandal in U.S. history, which will be bound to cripple Trump's and the U.S.' dignity."

But nothing beats the sentiments of the disaffected ally, in this case South Korea. "The Trump administration has a tendency to easily reverse itself, on both domestic and foreign policy, and it doesn't appear to feel much responsibility for doing so. Once a country loses its most precious diplomatic asset of trust, it cannot help becoming a paper tiger, no matter how it may flex its muscles," wrote an editorial on *Hankyoreh*.

Credibility is dependent on maintaining a viable presence, a challenging task for a U.S. Navy presence that is a shadow of its former Cold War self. Capacity and capability are two different attributes. For a fleet with capacity constraints, ship days constitute a critical capacity factor for maintaining presence – not being moored at a base but being physically out at sea for various activities. Even for the U.S. Navy, "ship days" are limited. Following sustained sorties, the ship must undergo downtime of maintenance and repairs before it is ready to sortie again, and the cycle repeats itself. Ship days are essentially finite and navies seek to maximize them.

There is a shortcut to this: by reducing the downtime to enable the ship to perform more sustained tempo of operations. But this invariably would increase wear and tear on equipment and create crew fatigue over time. At worst, prolonged deferment of downtime would risk an irreversible stage where it becomes less economical and safe to operate the ship, thereby necessitating new replacements. Trump's plans to increase the current 274-ship Navy to 355 vessels is a welcome step toward rectifying capacity shortfalls.

However, it also become clearer that implementing this ambitious plan will be challenging. The Congressional Budget Office in its April 2017 report stated that the earliest the Navy would achieve this goal would be in 2035, provided sufficient funding is available. Yet even this timeframe is optimistic, considering more time and money would be required. In fact, while welcoming his expansion plan, U.S. Navy leaders have urged Trump to first prioritize maintenance of the existing fleet, warning that maintenance backlogs and deferred availabilities are costing the Navy tens of millions of dollars and risking risky gaps at sea. It was thus proposed that the Navy reduce its operational tempo and limit the length of deployments, which have been frequently extended at sea in recent years, to keep to planned maintenance and reset schedules.

### **White, Not Grey, Hull FONOPs**

Simply put, the U.S. Navy has highly capable assets but lacks the capacity to maintain high tempo without straining equipment and personnel, a trend that will only get worse if not rectified soon. Moreover, it has since become a thankless job to do FONOPs unilaterally when close U.S. allies and partners – such as Australia, India, and Japan – have shied away from it. The latest call by Chief of Naval Operations Admiral John Richardson for more international partners to do FONOPs in the SCS is most likely going to draw the same lukewarm responses. One recalls that

in February 2016, Harris also made a similar call. Therefore, assuming a foreseeable scenario wherein the U.S. Navy would continue taking on the sole burden of FONOPs, it has become necessary to recalibrate the overall deterrence/coercion posture in the SCS.

Continued employment of highly-capable assets such as Aegis destroyers for such peacetime, low-intensity missions as FONOPs is not cost-effective, and would also be perceived by regional governments – not just China – to be unnecessarily provocative. A greater role for the U.S. Coast Guard deserves closer attention. Currently, Coast Guard law enforcement detachments are deployed on board U.S. Navy destroyers under the Oceania Maritime Security Initiative. But even if this practice is extended to the SCS context, the optics would still matter. Nobody would pay attention to the Coast Guard detachment beyond the vessel itself; such an arrangement does not alter the perception of overkill and destabilization.

With the budding new friendship between Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping following their meeting in April as well as Washington's need for Beijing's help over North Korea, now the continuation of FONOPs in the SCS is in jeopardy, especially after PACOM and the U.S. Navy requests were turned down by top Pentagon officials in February. This may affect U.S. credibility. If future FONOPs are to be conducted without unnecessarily appearing overly provocative, a more feasible solution is for a standing permanent force of Coast Guard vessels in the Asia-Pacific.

This same proposal was made by Coast Guard Commandant Admiral Paul Zukunft, who has been calling for a bigger Asia-Pacific role for the service, building on an earlier point made in February by his deputy, Vice Admiral Charles Michel. Michel had expressed hope for sending Coast Guard vessels to the SCS to assist the Navy in maintaining international order. The Coast Guard managed to evade Trump's earlier budget proposal to cut funding. In the longer term, if a permanent U.S. Coast Guard force is to be stationed in the Asia-Pacific for SCS duties, more funding would become necessary.

### **Revisiting Capacity-Building**

The centerpiece of existing capacity-building efforts is the Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative (SEAMSI) which, according to Harris in his statement to the Senate Armed Services Committee in February 2016, adopts a regional approach to help U.S. partners better sense activity within their sovereign territorial domain, share information with domestic joint and international combined forces, and contribute to regional peace and stability operations. However, this initiative in its present form is fraught with problems, primarily amongst which being the amount of funding – just \$425 million over five years and split between five key ASEAN countries, averaging approximately \$16 million per country per annum: barely sufficient for the purchase of significant items such as radars.

This shortfall means other countries may have to step in – Japan for example with its Vientiane Vision, which so far remains at the stage of discussion with prospective ASEAN partners. Thus far, surface and aerial patrol assets had been newly-built for, leased, or transferred to Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. India has also sought to play a role, by, for example, helping Vietnam acquire patrol vessels through a credit line. But clearly relying on these regional

allies and partners would not be sufficient given their own sets of security concerns. The way forward would be to revisit maritime security capacity-building assistance scheme for ASEAN countries in the longer term. In this respect, there are no lack of proposals.

For example, Richard Fontaine, president of the Center for a New American Security, proposed an Asian analogue to the European Reassurance Initiative, which was first put forward in 2014 at NATO's Warsaw Summit in an attempt to assure American allies of Washington's commitment to their security amid an increasing Russian threat. Senator John McCain, meanwhile, proposed the Asia-Pacific Stability Initiative, which called for \$7.5 billion spread over five years, aimed at increasing U.S. munitions stocks in the region, building new infrastructure, expanding military exercises, and enhancing the capacity of key allies and partners. This proposal has been backed by a bipartisan group of U.S. House and Senate members. Jim Talent and Dennis Shea, commissioners of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, called for eliminating the current caps on defense spending and expanding the U.S. Navy's size to send an important signal about U.S. resolve while enhancing America's military capabilities. They also argued for strengthening alliances and upgrading partnerships.

What may be required here is not just revising SEAMSI as part of a broader scheme to reassure about U.S. security commitment, but finding ways to meld this initiative seamlessly with those of U.S. allies and partners, such as Japan's Vientiane Vision and India's "Look East" policy, to minimize duplication of efforts in providing maritime security capacity-building assistance to ASEAN governments. ASEAN may provide a ready platform for the United States and likeminded allies and partners to play such a role. The Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum established in 2013 could gain more traction with intensified, coordinated efforts between these dialogue partners – Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, and possibly even South Korea.

All in all, a recalibrated form of deterrence/coercion in the SCS focusing more on the Coast Guard instead of Navy, coupled with a more collaborative framework between the United States and its allies and partners in building maritime security capacities amongst ASEAN governments, may well be a new "maritime pivot" for Trump to consider for reassuring and reengaging Southeast Asia without unnecessarily imperiling his newfound friendship with Xi.