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ANU College of Asia & the Pacific

September 2018



Beijing's Belligerent Revisionism: Reconstituting Asia's 'End of History'?

Christopher B. Roberts



Strategic & Defence
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Centre of Gravity series paper #42

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CRICOS#00120C

ISSN: 2208-7311 (Online)

ISSN: 2208-7303 (Print)



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Beijing's Belligerent Revisionism: Reconstituting Asia's 'End of History'?

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Executive Summary

- ✦ Indo-Pacific stability is being challenged by China's rise and its capitalist-authoritarian approach to development and international influence. The associated weakening of the rules-based order has been reinforced by a relative decline in United States leadership, influence, and power that is further reconstituting Fukuyama's 'end of history' thesis.
- ✦ China's actions in the South China Sea represent a strategic precedent for how China will secure its interests over other disputes, such as the India-China Border, the East China Sea, and Taiwan.
- ✦ Policy responses by rules-based states have largely been reactive with a short-term focus on narrow self-interest, whether the pursuit of economic gains or the temporary shelving of sources of tension.
- ✦ The absence of regional solidarity in upholding a stable rules-based order is reinforcing Beijing's belief in the effectiveness of its current strategy.

Policy Recommendations

The South China Sea

- ✦ The South China Sea is not yet lost to Beijing, but any resolution will require much stronger, multifaceted, and collective responses.
- ✦ An alternative approach to the creation of a South China Sea Code of Conduct is needed that goes beyond ASEAN to involve relevant stakeholder states from across the Indo-Pacific.
- ✦ Establish multinational coast-guard patrols to police and protect resources in areas that are clearly within the territory of the ASEAN claimant states.
- ✦ The collective articulation and signalling of 'red-lines' by regional rules-based states should be backed up by a clear willingness to apply hard power where necessary together with a face-saving exit for Beijing, as proposed herein, regarding its artificial islands.

The Broader Indo-Pacific

- ✦ A strategic dialogue between 'like-minded' states (i.e. supporters of a rules-based order) is needed to help coordinate multilateral activities and more robust signalling to Beijing.
- ✦ There is a need for more effective and collective Strategic Communications to counter the onslaught of PRC propaganda and psychological warfare activities.
- ✦ A mutual defence pact between a coalition of 'like-minded states' will ultimately be necessary. While difficult, a step-by-step approach can be undertaken as detailed within.
- ✦ Regarding the United States, there is a need for greater strategic patience rather than increased hedging with Beijing. Allies should also undertake more concrete actions to influence the Trump administration to better engage the region.

Introduction

During the final hours of the Cold War, Francis Fukuyama famously declared an international consensus on the final model of government had emerged, that of economic and political liberalism which he depicted as ‘the end of history’.¹ While close to six decades of Post-WWII American leadership were needed to get to this point, capitalism has since continued its steadfast advance just as Fukuyama predicted. However, the relative success of *capitalist authoritarianism* manifestations across Asia, with Beijing at the helm, was not predicted.

Three decades later, the liberal-democratic model is not only being questioned, but global economic dependence on China has enabled Beijing to revise the nascent rules-based order – an order minimally defined as stability through adherence to international treaty-based law. The result of Beijing’s revisionism has been blatant breaches of international law, unchecked coercion against other states, and reduced confidence in the United States’ security umbrella. To this end, since the turn of the millennium, Washington has also been an unwitting partner in the reconstitution of the ‘end of history’.

The weakening rules-based order

So, how could the Asian order be upturned in such a brief period? What led to the rapid assertion of Chinese influence at the expense of U.S. leadership?

The key inflection point occurred in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks with the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. The two military operations were far costlier and time consuming than Washington and its allies expected. Moreover, their dubious success created a domino effect further dividing the Western and Islamic worlds and generating greater instability across the Middle East and Asia through the collapse of governments and the rise of terrorist organisations such as Islamic State. Given these distractions, many Asian political elites believe that Washington neglected its traditional security, political, and economic leadership across East Asia.



Meanwhile, the enormous diversion of resources to fight the ‘War on Terror’ combined with the incalculable human suffering (e.g. millions of displaced people) also contributed to the Global Financial Crisis and the associated ramifications for reconstituting the ‘end of history’, at least as theorised in Asia.

America’s weakening influence across Asia was implicitly acknowledged by the former Obama administration’s much publicised ‘Pivot’ and then ‘Rebalance’ to Asia. While Obama’s rhetoric was meant to assure the region of U.S. commitment there, there was little substance behind the rhetoric. By the end of Obama’s second term, the most significant development was an ill-fated agreement with eleven other countries on the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)—a mega free trade agreement representing over 40% of global gross domestic product—that captured the attention of a few potential new security partners such as Vietnam.

However, the position of the United States on the TPP and its broader foreign policy agenda was further undermined during the 2016 U.S. presidential election campaign through the polarising nature of the final Democratic and Republican contenders and their populist rhetoric. Thus, both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump pledged to abandon the TPP if elected. Within three days of Donald Trump’s presidency he signed a ‘presidential memorandum’ to terminate the agreement, an action undertaken in the absence of any consultation with the other eleven TPP states.² From the perspective of most Asian academic and political elites, Washington’s engagement with Asia during the next fifteen months was primarily limited to the Korean Peninsula and China and anything beyond was left in stasis.

Washington has also been an unwitting partner in the reconstitution of the ‘end of history’.

The story of this structural transition may start with the United States, but it is Beijing that eagerly exploited America's distraction. In less than a decade it was able to first catapult its economic influence and then its political-security influence to game-changing levels. Beijing's capacity to radically enmesh itself in multiple domains across much of Asia was assisted by up to double-digit growth through the 1980s, 1990s, and as recently as 2010 when China surpassed Japan to become the second largest global economy. For many political elites, particularly within ASEAN, this transition was initially interpreted as relatively benign, possibly inevitable, and an outcome that some even celebrated – e.g. former policy makers such as Kishore Mahbubani (Singapore) or serving political leaders from countries like Malaysia, Cambodia and, more recently, the Philippines.³

Nevertheless, since the Global Financial Crisis and through to the unfolding war on trade, contending Asian perspectives about China and the United States have become increasingly polarised. Beijing's Cold War era armed attacks and support for insurgencies and/or proxy armies have not entirely disappeared, but they were, in many minds, supplanted by its 'Charm Offensive' from the 1990s through to around 2010. This approach has since been replaced by more coercive and threatening actions with one of the most divisive issues, at least for East Asia, being the territorial disputes across the South China Sea.

The South China Sea precedent

Despite ASEAN engagement on the South China Sea issue since 1992 and Beijing's agreement to the 2002 ASEAN Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC), Beijing has breached both the norms of the DOC (e.g. by changing the 'status quo') and has exploited and manipulated ASEAN's processes and internal divisions with duplicitous statements and chequebook diplomacy. This, together with Beijing's consent to documents like the 2017 'Framework Agreement' and the 2018 'Negotiating Text' have enabled Beijing to delay any final agreement on the long-sought ASEAN Code of Conduct until the Code of Conduct's text is almost completely on China's terms.⁴

Most significantly, Beijing has breached its legally binding treaty obligations under the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), a treaty it ratified in 1996. Here, Beijing's illegal actions include breaching the 'sovereign rights' of other claimant states by interfering with legitimate fishing activities and the creation and subsequent militarisation of large scale artificial islands.

**The Code of
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The Chinese government and its state-owned media claim that Beijing is a victim of unjustified containment policies by the United States and its allies. These propagandist statements, as a component of their broader and well-coordinated political warfare strategy, point to developments like the rotational deployment of 2,500 Marines in Darwin, Australia (more than 4,000 kilometres from China's Hainan Island) and U.S. Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs). The latter have included entry within the 12-nautical mile territorial zone of disputed reefs and shoals in the South China Sea. However, there has been very little tangible 'containment' of Beijing's behaviour.

Across the Indo-Pacific, China's refusal to comply with the 'binding' July 2016 Arbitral Ruling under the auspices of UNCLOS had significant geo-strategic implications. However, equally noteworthy was the failure of the international community, including the United States, to take decisive action to deter Beijing's flagrant breaches of international law and the 'rules-based order'.

For the region and especially the Philippines, China's 2012 seizure of Scarborough Shoal from Manila was a 'watershed event'. The Obama administration seemed content to foster an agreement between China and the Philippines, but when China immediately breached the agreement and seized the shoal, the Obama administration seemed paralysed.⁵ The Philippine President flew to Washington to personally plea for additional support, but none was forthcoming.⁶

The ultimate pivot point was Beijing's rapid construction of over 3,200 acres of artificial islands from early 2013. Despite a reference to possible land reclamation by a Philippine news article on 31 July 2013, and a single satellite image on the Jane's Intelligence site in October 2014 (subscription only), comprehensive imagery of the artificial islands was not publicly available until February 2015.⁷ A former senior U.S. government intelligence officer with direct oversight of PRC intelligence collection and analysis has told the author:

The Obama administration was not surprised by the building of these islands, at least operationally. I think everyone was surprised that they'd do this, but when they started there was no mistaking it. I was personally involved in providing warning. We pushed our briefs to [Washington] DC every day and made special briefings and papers. It is a lie to suggest [that] the Obama administration was caught off guard. They watched in silence for years ... they did nothing but deny that it was happening.⁸

The failure of key nations to publicize this illegal construction was a stunning dereliction of duty.

The failure of key nations to publicize this illegal construction was a stunning dereliction of duty. Whether intended or not, the silence of the Five Eyes intelligence grouping (the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand) effectively protected the PRC actions. Beijing bypassed international pressure to prevent the island construction—e.g., via a naval blockade—as, by 2015, the substance of the island construction was a *fait accompli*.



Given these considerations, in July 2017 Beijing threatened to attack Vietnamese outposts in the Spratly region unless Hanoi ordered Repsol, a Spanish oil drilling firm, to abandon its 'Red Emperor' site in the seas extending from the south-western point of Vietnam. The Vietnamese government initially postponed Repsol's extraction of oil but by mid-March 2018, Hanoi believed it had no option other than to comply with Beijing's demands despite a port visit by a U.S. Navy Carrier a week earlier—the first in over forty years.

For the broader Indo-Pacific, the text submitted by China in the leaked South China Sea 'Negotiating Text' (June 2018) is also alarming as it is clearly designed to manipulate the Code of Conduct drafting process to cover issues well beyond the Code's original purpose. This includes provisions designed to exclude other non-ASEAN major and middle powers from military and economic activities across the maritime region with other clauses being designed to consolidate Beijing's influence within ASEAN—e.g. 'regular joint patrols'.⁹ ASEAN may reject some of the more controversial provisions, but it is unlikely to garner the cohesion necessary to negotiate an effective and legally binding code of conduct.¹⁰

Meanwhile, a belief in the possible loss of the South China Sea—'in all scenarios short of war'—for both the ASEAN claimant states and other stakeholder states supporting a 'rules-based order', has been reflected in public statements from past and present senior United States and Australian military officers.¹¹

The precedents from the South China Sea, together with the relative success of Russia in the Russo-Georgian War, later annexation of Crimea, and simultaneous political and military interference across Ukraine's eastern border, mean that revisionist countries, such as China, will be more emboldened in undertaking future coercive actions where peaceful diplomacy fails to secure their interests. For example, how might Beijing's win in the South China Sea affect a future cost-benefit analysis associated with an invasion of Taiwan? Already, China would be noting assessments from U.S. military analysts that Taiwan would need to defend itself for up to a month before U.S. armed forces could launch a conventional military defence of the island, up from a two-day response time at the height of U.S. military preparedness.¹²

Further security challenges and regional resistance

Such assertive scenarios have already started to unfold in other parts of the Indo-Pacific. In the East China Sea, since mid-2012, Beijing also undertook its own large-scale version of FONOPs by sending Chinese government vessels and aircraft within Japan's claimed 24-nautical mile contiguous zone and/or 12-nautical mile territorial sea to challenge Japan's claims regarding the Senkaku/Diaoyu Island chain.

These PRC operations have included as many as 147 vessels in a single month and scores of aircraft: the Japan Air Self Defence force responded to 851 aircraft incursions in 2016. Then, little more than a year after the Chinese FONOPs commenced, China unilaterally restricted regional airspace in November 2013 through the imposition of an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) which extended over and beyond the Senkaku/Diaoyu Island chain.¹³

Between June and August 2017, China also (unsuccessfully) tested India's resolve when it breached two former agreements not to change the 'status quo'. It commenced dual purpose road construction within territory claimed by Bhutan and close to Sikkim, an area where Indian forces maintain a strategic advantage by being stationed at the top of the Chumbi Valley's ridgeline.

Given these developments, Australia, India, and Japan initially toughened their positions. For example, at the June 2017 Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD), Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull stated that the region must preserve the 'rules based structure' and '[t]his means cooperation, not unilateral actions to seize or create territory or militarise disputed areas... not winning through corruption, interference or coercion'.¹⁴



Given these developments, Australia, India, and Japan initially toughened their positions.

Common threat perceptions led to a convergence of interests (albeit seemingly transient) between India, Australia, Japan, and the United States and a late 2017 agreement to resurrect the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad 2.0). The first iteration of this dialogue had previously collapsed in 2008 when, following pressure from Beijing, Australia unilaterally withdrew from the associated Malabar naval exercises.

The first senior officials meeting between the revived Quad 2.0 countries was held on the sidelines of the November 2017 East Asia Summit in Manila. Discussions included the maintenance of the 'rules-based order', 'maritime security', and 'freedom of navigation and overflight'.¹⁵ However, there was insufficient agreement on key issues for a joint communiqué. A second senior officials' meeting was held in June 2018 but there was little by way of noteworthy outcomes.

Key democracies such as India and Japan have also sought to challenge China's rising influence through initiatives for greater aid, trade, and investment. Tokyo, for example, maintains very good long-term relations with the ASEAN states and Japan has noticeably increased its foreign direct investments to ensure it remains ahead of China in key 'pivot states' such as Indonesia.

If close allies and security partners can be subjected to trade barriers by Washington, what can others expect?

In the case of India, Prime Minister Modi has strengthened bilateral relations with Japan and transformed the country's 'Look East' to an 'Act East' policy involving various projects including a US\$ 1 billion line of credit for connectivity investments. Aside from the United States, India and Japan have also been proactive in enhancing the military capacity of key Southeast Asian states through training, the supply of armaments, and much needed surveillance aircraft, navy patrol boats, and coastguard vessels.¹⁶

Problematically, however, despite Prime Minister Abe investing a lot of political capital in Japan's relationship with Washington, Japan and India are being targeted by possible U.S. trade tariffs.¹⁷ The implications of this cannot be overstated: if close allies and security partners can be subjected to trade barriers by Washington, what can others expect? Regional solidarity and confidence in the United States was also undermined by President Obama's cuts to the Southeast Asian 'Security Assistance Budget' (19%, 2010-2015), and an additional 24.4% reduction announced by President Trump in 2018.¹⁸



Given such developments, in April 2018 Prime Minister Modi held a summit with President Xi Jinping followed by, two weeks later, a trilateral summit between the leaders of Japan and South Korea and China's Prime Minister Li Keqiang. Both summit meetings invoked noticeably warmer language, and in the case of the latter, the Chinese state media declared it to have 'brought the estranged relations between China and Japan back onto the right track'.¹⁹ In the absence of Washington's economic leadership (including the abandonment of the TPP), China, Japan, and South Korea agreed to speed up negotiations for another major FTA that excludes the United States: the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).²⁰

Currently, there is much debate over the utility and future of the Quad 2.0, but in the absence of significant U.S. leadership and/or an international 'shock' to fuse the four countries together, the Quad will not tangibly affect the cost-benefit analysis of Beijing. To reinforce this point, during the same week as the India-China Summit, and for the second time in two years, New Delhi rejected Canberra's request to re-join the Malabar Exercises as an observer.²¹

An element of hedging with China has also extended to Australia which has likewise pushed to speed up negotiations to conclude RCEP and, during the lead up to the July 2018 Australia-United States Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN) talks, Foreign Minister Bishop categorically ruled out the possibility of FONOPs against China for the first time. She argued that Australia had never conducted such operations against a specific country in the past and it would be an 'extra-ordinary' step to do so.²²

More broadly, the current chaos in the White House, including Trump's Twitter diplomacy, is further undermining regional confidence in the U.S. security umbrella. For example, how might President Trump's Twitter statements against NATO and the European Union, amidst positive statements toward recalcitrant Russia, be perceived by America's friends and allies in the Indo-Pacific? How might Trump's unilateral decision to halt joint U.S.-South Korea military drills at the June 2018 U.S.-North Korea Singapore Summit affect Seoul's perceptions about the trustworthiness of Washington? In the process, how might such behaviours affect calculations by Beijing concerning the potential vulnerabilities it can exploit, including America's alliance with South Korea and the related security of Taiwan?

Foreign Minister Bishop spoke for much of the Indo-Pacific when, at a 'pre-AUSMIN' Chatham House gathering in London, she stated that '[o]ur closest ally and the world's most powerful nation is being seen as less predictable and less committed to the international order it pioneered.' She added that '[t]he US is now favouring a more disruptive, often unilateral foreign trade policy that has hardened anxiety about its commitment to the rules-based order that it established, protected and guaranteed.'²³ This critique, in many respects, was necessary as friends should be able to speak frankly when an ally is harming itself, a mutual alliance, and/or the interests of the broader region.

Given these considerations, it is somewhat ironic that in March 2018 the Trump administration finally articulated its strategy for greater engagement through a 'free and open Indo-Pacific'. However, for most Asian political elites, and amidst concurrent declarations of 'America First', there is a lack of substance to the strategy and there remains a desire for it to be filled with more substantial action and values-based leadership.



The current chaos in the White House ... is further undermining regional confidence in the U.S.

Policy implications

Based on the current trajectory, Asia's post-World War II order as we know it, which arguably peaked during the decade that followed Fukuyama's declaration of 'the end of history', is in its dying throws. But this does not mean that the South China Sea is 'lost' or that totalitarianism and authoritarianism are the Indo-Pacific waves of the future.

Positive change can happen, and it is possible to push back.

China, working with revisionist authoritarian powers such as Russia and North Korea, is eager to deliver a *coup de grâce* to end that era. As China has risen, it has demonstrated an astounding capacity to reinvent itself domestically and internationally, and the achievements of the past few decades, for such a populous country, are unprecedented. Equally unprecedented is Beijing's challenge to a relatively entrenched regional order where the nature of U.S. leadership together with broader norms, rules, and international law had, to some extent, guided international affairs and provided decades of stability.

Aside from missing U.S. leadership and fortitude, the hesitance of major and middle powers to more collectively respond to regional threats is also profoundly destabilising. This will not change unless they can come to a far more synchronised view of the key challenges that confront all states in support of a rules-based order. Meanwhile, a potential trade war involving much of the region and the world will undermine the liberal-economic order and further destabilise the Indo-Pacific.

Policy implications for the South China Sea

Should regional 'rules-based' states stalwartly work together to force a shift in Beijing's strategies, then positive change can happen, and it is possible to push back against China in the South China Sea. To this end, the South China Sea needs a *meaningful* Code of Conduct but ASEAN's capacity to negotiate this is highly questionable. A sub-group of willing ASEAN states may need to negotiate the Code (absent countries under Beijing's influence) or key ASEAN claimants could alternatively forge a Code of Conduct with key non-ASEAN stakeholder countries and present it as a *fait accompli* to Beijing. In addition to addressing the Code of Conduct, much more is needed including multinational FONOPs and Coastguard patrols. The multinational Coastguard patrols could *police* and *protect* resources in the 'legally' undisputed areas of a willing state's EEZ.



Equally important will be timely and coordinated signalling to Beijing regarding the costs of Beijing's revisionism, the clear articulation of 'red lines', and the actions that will follow should those red lines be crossed. China has publicly declared that it will not militarise the artificial islands and they were built to 'fulfil its international responsibilities in the areas of maritime search-and-rescue, disaster prevention and mitigation, marine research, meteorological observation, environmental protection and fishery production'.²⁴ Therefore, international pressure against Beijing should be reinforced by offering a face-saving strategy for a diplomatic way out by converting the features into multinational search and rescue facilities and maritime research facilities.

Policy implications for the Indo-Pacific

Some of these proposed actions and activities could be expanded to cover the broader Indo-Pacific. For this purpose, a strategic dialogue between supporters of the rules-based order is also needed. Whether led by governments, or regional think tanks as a first step, and whether through an expansion of the Quad 2.0 or through linking the current myriad of minilateral mechanisms, this dialogue could help coordinate multilateral activities and more robust signalling to Beijing.

Further, supporters of a rules-based order must develop effective Strategic Communications to confront the massive onslaught of PRC propaganda and psychological warfare activities via Beijing's 'United Front'. These countries should work together to expose PRC political warfare operations and to counter propagandist statements from Beijing and its state-controlled media. To this end, task groups to coordinate such statements could be established in willing countries. These task groups should also broadcast any intelligence on attempts to change the status quo whether through land reclamation, military installations, or other means.

From an Indo-Pacific mutual defence pact to future U.S. leadership

Given the dire assessments in this paper, ultimately it will be necessary for a mutual defence pact against unprovoked military attempts to change the status quo in the East China Sea, the North Natuna Sea, and along India's border. Establishing a mutual defence pact will not be easy. However, this preventative measure will be easier and less costly than any belated attempt to prevent armed conflict, or respond with 'too little, too late' forces after a conflict breaks out.

Ultimately it will be necessary for a mutual defence pact.



Years of appeasement have taken a heavy toll on regional will and, in those countries most targeted by the PRC's extensive propaganda machine, on their national will to respond. However, the window to restrain China from applying the South China Sea precedent to other conflict areas may close within the next five to ten years. Therefore, as a first step, a coalition of like-minded rules-based states should establish an emergency response mechanism in the event of any military attempt to change the status quo in areas such as the North Natuna Sea, the East China Sea, Taiwan, and/or India's expansive border with China.

In the first instance, such a mechanism could entail a commitment for 'emergency talks' between government leaders and/or heads of militaries to issue a joint communiqué to condemn the use of force. A second step in this direction could involve a commitment for logistical support (e.g. rearmaments, fuel, and other supplies); humanitarian aid; the sharing of intelligence (including hostile military movements); and the imposition of collective sanctions with near immediate effect.

The key to the success of attempts to implement these policy recommendations would be membership based on common values and interests. The realisation of these measures would send the strongest possible signal to Beijing and would provide the best possible chance to get it to reassess its current militaristic strategies and thereby mitigate the risk of armed conflict in the Indo-Pacific.

A failure on either front will signal that China will benefit from future coercive and/or military actions.



Meanwhile, there is a need for more concerted efforts by allies and friends of the United States to quietly influence the Trump administration toward more constructive engagement with the region—engagement that should also include sound economic leadership. Washington, for its part, needs to fix the current chaos in the White House, including Trump's Twitter diplomacy and other highly erratic public statements. Given current uncertainties regarding the dependability of the United States, the exercise of strategic patience and an avoidance of the temptation for rules-based states to hedge with Beijing will also be necessary.

Conclusion

Fukuyama was half right. It is unlikely that we will ever see the return of large-scale outright socialist revolutions. Nonetheless, the maintenance of an economically liberal and politically stable *rules-based order* is a responsibility that all states must uphold, and for those that don't then they must be shown the way. In the case of the latter, this would preferably be done through diplomatic means but also needs to be reinforced with a demonstrated readiness to apply hard power where necessary.

Since May 2018, there have been some positive signs that the United States is taking a stronger stance against Beijing's transgressions, particularly in the South China Sea. However, Washington cannot be expected to defend the region on its own. Should the supporters of a rules-based order act together then that may also entice the United States to more substantially and constructively reengage with the region. A failure on either front will signal to Beijing and the region that China will benefit from future coercive and/or military actions in other regional arenas.

Policy Recommendations

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- ✦ The South China Sea is not yet lost to Beijing, but any resolution will require much stronger, multifaceted, and collective responses.
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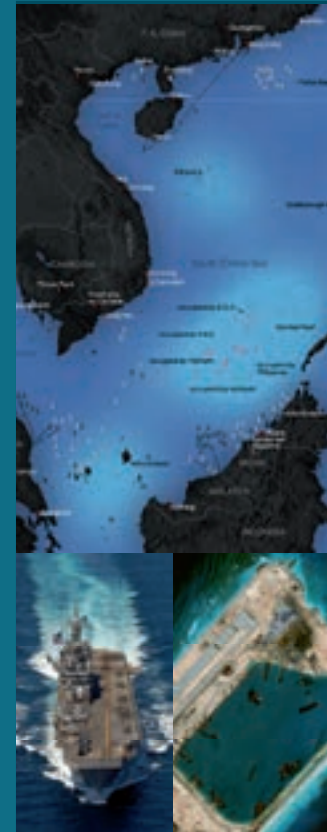
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