

## US Naval Coalition Building and Regional Security in the Asia-Pacific

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### Abstract

*The US Navy has maintained America's regional hegemony in the Asia-Pacific since the end of World War II. China in recent years has made dramatic progress in its quest for seapower, challenging US maritime dominance in the region. The United States seeks to maintain command of the sea by engaging in collaborative naval diplomacy with allies and friends in the region. This paper analyzes interactions between the US Navy and naval colleagues in the Asia-Pacific and seeks to determine if the web of US naval relations is sufficient for the United States to remain the dominant seapower in the region.*

*Keywords: Coalitions, naval diplomacy, security, sea power, Asia Pacific*

### Introduction

The United States has been the dominant maritime power in the Asia Pacific since the end of World War II. A more modern and assertive China appears poised to compete with the United States for regional primacy. The United States seeks to maintain regional security and the existing balance of power in the Asia Pacific by engaging in collaborative naval diplomacy and coalition building with allies and friends in the region. This paper analyzes US efforts to improve maritime relations with allies and emerging powers in the region in an attempt to maintain maritime dominance of the Asia-Pacific. It analyzes interactions between the US Navy and naval colleagues in the Asia-Pacific ranging from highly organized multinational exercises, bilateral military exercises and informal gatherings, to port calls and coordinated responses to humanitarian crisis. This paper

seeks to determine if the web of US naval relations is sufficient for the United States to remain the dominant seapower in the region.

The paper begins with a discussion of the concept and practice of naval diplomacy, and US reengagement with the Asia Pacific during the Obama administration. The second part of the paper examines US efforts to engage in naval diplomacy with regional allies and friends. The third part of the paper assesses the possibility of regional maritime coalitions. The paper concludes the long-established US maritime relations are secure in the Asia-Pacific, and that the United States is in a good position to continue, strengthen, and take advantage of those relations. It does not appear, however, the United States will be able to go beyond bilateral security arrangements and move forward with maritime coalition-building among its allies and partners in the Asia-Pacific in the near future.

### **What is Naval Diplomacy and why is it important?**

Naval diplomacy is the use of maritime power to threaten the use of force short of war. A nation-state uses naval diplomacy to influence events in the pursuit of its national interest. Naval historian and geostrategist Sir Julian Corbett described the first function of the fleet as “to support or obstruct diplomatic effort”.<sup>1</sup> Naval historian and strategist Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan claimed that possession of seapower increased a nation’s prestige, power and security, and influence. A strong power needed to be strong at sea; weakness at sea put a country in danger at sea and at home.<sup>2</sup>

One classic example of naval diplomacy is Athens’ use of its navy to try to deter aggression in the Peloponnesus in 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Athens tried to use naval diplomacy to deter rival Corinth from attacking Athens’ nominal ally, Corcyra. Initially, Athens determined to “just a little bit involved” by sending a show of force of ten ships to deter Corinth, but ended up getting dragged

into the fight. Fearful of the rise of Athens, Sparta joined the fray to maintain the balance of power in the region. The result was the (Second) Peloponnesian war (431-404 BC) and ultimately the demise of the Athenian naval empire.

In the case above, naval diplomacy was used in a competitive way. This use of naval diplomacy is commonly associated with the concept of Gunboat Diplomacy, which is foreign policy supported by military force or the threat of military force if desired outcomes are not realized. Basically, Gunboat Diplomacy is the use or threat of limited naval force short of war.<sup>3</sup> Athens' attempt at Gunboat Diplomacy failed, however, bringing down its entire empire. Naval diplomacy is not limited to Gunboat Diplomacy, however. It can be subtle, yet effective. Take for instance President Theodore Roosevelt's Great White Fleet of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Made up of sixteen battleships, the fleet in 1907 began a world cruise to demonstrate America's naval prowess. Making twenty port of calls on six continents, the voyage of the Great White Fleet is considered one of history's greatest peacetime achievements of the US Navy. Fresh off victory in the Spanish-American War (1898), Roosevelt wanted to demonstrate US naval superiority to maintain the country's new global status. In the Asia-Pacific, Roosevelt wanted to show Japan, which had recently emerged victorious from encounters with China and Russia, that US seapower extended to the Asia Pacific.

One of the earliest examples of US naval diplomacy was the use of the US Navy against the Barbary pirates. North African pirates for centuries had menaced merchant ships sailing the waters of the Mediterranean, where they captured and enslaved non-Muslims unless they were protected by treaties involving tribute payments. In fact, most countries paid tribute to avoid harassment. The US Congress employed naval diplomacy in 1794 by voting to construct six frigates for a navy.

Armed with this new navy, President Thomas Jefferson refused to continue to pay tribute, and engaged the Barbary pirates. As a result, the pirates no longer attacked US merchant ships.

US naval diplomacy in the Asia Pacific can be traced to at least the mid-1800s when Commodore Matthew Perry used classic gunboat diplomacy to forcibly reopen Japan after two centuries of isolation. A couple of decades later, Commodore Robert W. Shufeldt similarly opened Korea to the United States. The outbreak of the First World War in Europe stimulated US naval modernization and expansion, so that by the end of that war, the United States stood with Britain and Japan as the world's major naval powers. The United States emerged from the Second World War as the dominant naval power in the western Atlantic and the Pacific. To deter the Soviet Union during the Cold War, US naval diplomacy involved keeping sea lanes open. US naval diplomacy was used in concert with land and air forces of the US and its allies in Europe and Asia. The navy provided US commitment of force to multilateral regional pacts, bilateral alliances, and other arrangements through which the United States sought to organize the nations of the free world. The most significant contribution to US naval diplomacy was the creation of the Sixth Fleet, established in the Mediterranean in the 1940s. The Sixth Fleet enabled the United States to project power within striking distance of Russia. The Seventh Fleet, is the Sixth Fleet's counterpart in the Asia-Pacific. It is the largest forward-deployed US fleet with responsibility for the more than 48 million square miles of the Western Pacific and Indian Oceans. Since the end of the Second World War, the Seventh Fleet has carried out or assisted in numerous operations. For instance, in 1950 President Truman neutralized the Taiwan Strait by inserting the Seventh Fleet between Taiwan and mainland China to prevent the Nationalists and the Communists from attacking each other. In the 1950s, the Seventh Fleet participated in the Korean War, provided air cover for the Nationalist evacuation of the Tachen Islands, and assisted in operations in defense of the ROC's offshore

islands of Matsu and Quemoy. It later engaged in combat operations during the Vietnam War. It assisted in humanitarian operations in Japan following the massive earthquake and tsunami that struck northern Japan in 2011. Today, the Seventh Fleet is key to US naval diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific, making more than 500 port visits to more than 25 countries each year. Operating with allies, partners and friends, the Seventh Fleet supports US national interests by upholding key alliances and expanding regional maritime partnerships.

### **US Rebalance to Asia-Pacific and Naval Diplomacy**

In the past decade, the United States has expanded its naval presence in Asia. Much of the expansion began under former presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. Their administrations moved new forces to Guam, deployed new weapons systems in the Asia-Pacific, and maintained a high level of military spending for the region despite costly military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. President Barack Obama continued Bush-era efforts to increase US military presence in southern Asia by rotating deployments rather than deployments of permanent bases and to strengthen existing alliances with Japan, South Korea and Australia; forge new political and security relationships with India, Indonesia, and Vietnam; and actively participate in emerging multilateral institutions in the region, particularly in the East Asia Summit. He also attempted to strengthen bilateral and multilateral economic ties through the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP),<sup>4</sup> from which President Trump pulled out.

What most differentiates the Obama administration's reengagement from that of his predecessors' is the integration of South Asia into the US security framework and the emphasis on the military security leg of rebalancing. US agreements with South Asia have become more important since the US Congress nixed military construction in Guam where the United States has

been increasing its military presence since 2000. These forward-deployed forces increase US operational presence, power projection and deterrence, and can be used in the case of disasters or in support of US regional allies if needed.<sup>5</sup>

As part of Obama's rebalance to the Asia Pacific, the United States is poised to place 60 percent of US naval assets in the Asia Pacific. Fifty-five percent of US ships are already in the region, but achieving the increase will be difficult because of sequestration. The size of the navy has actually decreased since 2013. At 272 ships, the Navy is far below the 2016 force structure assessment recommendation of a 355-ship fleet. If sequestration continues, the Navy will have fewer ships to place in the Asia Pacific. In addition, the Navy will be forced to further delay critical warfighting capabilities, reduce readiness of forces needed for contingency response, forego or stretch procurement of ships and submarines, and further downsize weapons capacity.<sup>6</sup> Budget cuts and force reduction raises suspicion among US allies and friends in the region that the United States is less committed to maintaining the security of the region.

### **Enhancing Naval Diplomacy with Allies and friends in the Asia-Pacific**

US rebalance policy seeks to encourage US allies and friends in the Asia-Pacific to develop their own security capacities and capabilities, which can then be used in concert with US military forces in the region. The next section of the paper examines US efforts to enhance naval diplomacy with Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, Singapore, Vietnam, and India.

#### US Naval Diplomacy with Japan

Japan is front and center in US naval diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific. Its security alliance with Japan is one America's most important military relationships in the region. The anchor of the US-Japan security alliance is the 1960 Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security, which grants the United States the right to military bases in Japan in exchange for a US pledge to defend Japan in the event of an attack. Related to the Treaty are Guidelines for Japan-US Defense Cooperation, which outline cooperative measures during peacetime. These measures are intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) sharing; air and missile defense and maritime security, training and exercises, logistic support, and use of facilities.<sup>7</sup> The Guidelines call for the two countries to cooperate in maintaining freedom of navigation (FON) in the region by ISR sharing, and by training and maritime exercises. The Guidelines also call for sharing maritime domain awareness<sup>8</sup> by coordinating with relevant agencies. Initially devised in 1979, the Guidelines have been periodically updated, the most recent coming in 2015 shortly after Prime Minister Abe's visit to Washington. Prime Minister Abe is supportive of US rebalance policy, and supported updated Guidelines that allow Japan a greater role in maintaining the security of the Asia-Pacific. The 2015 update deepens the US-Japan security relationship in several ways, reflecting the important role that Japan plays in US rebalance to the Asia-Pacific. First, the updated Guidelines allow Japan to deploy in support of US operations without specific legislation and boosts Tokyo's involvement in maritime and missile defense.<sup>9</sup> They also expand mutual defense provisions, giving Japan more ability to come to the defense of the United States. For instance, the updated Guidelines allow Japan to shoot down missiles heading for US territory even if Japan is not under attack.<sup>10</sup> The Guidelines also enable Japan to project power globally by indicating that security threats to Japan are not limited to geography.<sup>11</sup> Abe has faced significant domestic opposition to the new guidelines

as violation of the Japanese Constitution, and fears of involvement in a war between the United States and another country that could devastate Japan along with all of its American bases.

Japan has adopted a more assertive defense posture under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. In 2015, Japan's parliament approved legislation that allows the country's military to fight overseas, for the first time since the Second World War, in defense of a friendly country under attack. In 2015, Japan approved a record defense budget of \$41.4 billion. It is the fourth time that Japan has increased its defense spending since Abe became Prime Minister in 2012. Defense spending is meant to solidify Japan's position in its dispute with China over the sovereignty of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands by investing in maritime patrol aircraft, Aegis destroyers, and additional amphibious assault vessels. Japan is also upgrading its F-15 and F-16 fighters and its submarine fleet.<sup>12</sup> Because of the bilateral security alliance, these enhanced capabilities will strengthen naval diplomacy capabilities of both Japan and the United States. Given the historical animosities, the buildup forces may also increase the risk of war, resulting even by accident, as the East China Sea becomes more and more crowded.

#### US Naval Diplomacy with South Korea

South Korea also features prominently in US naval diplomacy and alliance-building in the Asia-Pacific. The US and South Korea signed a mutual defense pact in 1953. The security alliance serves to deter a North Korean attack on the South as well as provide a continental base for US forces to face China and Russia. South Korea enjoys robust economic relations with China, and while the Korean people carefully watch China's rise, they are less perturbed by it than their American counterparts. Overall, they would rather work with China as a trade partner than consider it a potential military adversary.<sup>13</sup> These perceptions shape South Korea's naval relations with the

United States. Although the US has had naval forces in Korea since the early 1950s, it appears that Seoul is not about to rush headlong into deepening naval diplomacy with Washington. Seoul appears wary of being dragged into conflicts of which they want no part. Many Koreans oppose the 2017 US deployment of Theater High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) in South Korea. As a candidate for office, South Korean President Moon Jae-in had called US deployment of THAAD “regrettable.” He has made no move to challenge its deployment following his May 2017 election, however. President Moon seeks better relations with the DPRK, perhaps changing the US security calculus in the region.

In fact, Seoul appears to want to demonstrate to Washington that it has grown up, and that it is no longer the junior partner in the relationship. For instance, in 2010 former Korean President Lee Myung-bak coined the term “Global Korea” to signify that Korea was ready to be more active in the international community.<sup>14</sup> One such way that Korea is reaching out is by developing the capacity and desire to participate in maritime security, peacekeeping, and post-conflict stabilization missions. As a result, Korea is developing its navy to enhance its seapower. Korea’s desire for greater sea power makes sense given 78 percent of its GDP comes from merchandise trade, most of it seaborne.<sup>15</sup> Historically, economic powers seek seapower to protect their economic interests.

South Korea plans to increase defense spending 4 percent in 2016. Defense spending accounted for 14.5 percent of South Korea’s 2015 national budget of \$331 billion. South Korean investment in naval development is striking for a country of its size, and one that is surrounded by great powers. But given South Korea's high level of dependence on global trade, the development of an ability to contribute to maritime security is a logical development. South Korea’s navy has been increasing spending on high-tech weapons in recent years, and is increasing its anti-

submarine systems.<sup>16</sup> Korea's robust navy has participated with the US Navy in anti-piracy missions, and can play a key role in Freedom of Navigation operations (FONOPS).

In response to an underground nuclear test by the DPRK in January 2016 and several missile tests in 2016 and 2017, Seoul has agreed to accept additional deployment of US "strategic assets" in South Korea. Assets are likely to include the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan - currently based in Japan - B-2 bombers, nuclear-powered submarines and F-22 stealth fighter jets, and possibly Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD). The United States sent the first elements of THAAD to South Korea following DPRK missile tests in March 2017. Beijing vehemently opposed deployment of THAAD. Because the system would integrate Korean Peninsula-based defense systems with US and Japanese sensors in Northeast Asia, Beijing views it as a first step in US-Japan-ROK military cooperation, with the broader goal of forming a trilateral alliance to contain China.<sup>17</sup> Another important role that South Korea plays in naval diplomacy is that of supplier of naval vessels. As one of the world's largest ship builders, Korea is an important source of ships for Asia-Pacific countries. South Korea has sold submarines to Indonesia, and Malaysia and the Philippines are interested in buying ROK-made ships.

#### US Naval Diplomacy with Australia

Its alliance with Australia is one of the US' most enduring in the Asia-Pacific. The United States and Australia have had a mutual defense pact since the end of World War Two. The Australia, New Zealand, US (ANZUS) Security Treaty<sup>18</sup> of 1951 stipulates that the parties will protect each other if attacked or if the Pacific region is attacked. In 2011, the treaty was amended to include attacks in cyber space. It was the first treaty to include cyberattacks. In 2012, Australia agreed to allow the United States to station two advanced space surveillance

mechanisms in Australia. The first is a space-surveillance radar that can help the US identify satellites, their orbits and potential anomalies. Originally based in Antigua in the West Indies, the United States moved the radar to Western Australia. The move to Australia has given the US much-needed southern and eastern hemispheric coverage that will help the US better monitor Chinese space craft. The system provides a critical dedicated sensor for the U.S. Space Surveillance Network, the main system that the United States and its partners rely on to detect, track and identify objects in space. It also can help in tracking high-interest space launches from Asia.<sup>19</sup> The other system is an advanced space surveillance telescope designed and built by the US' Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA). The telescope offers better deep-space surveillance than that offered by current telescopes.

In 2014, the United States and Australia signed a military cooperation pact allowing the two countries' militaries to transfer controlled goods without needing an export license. The agreement, which the US had already enjoyed with the UK, streamlines exchanges of military-industrial goods among the United States, Australia and the UK. In 2016, the United States began rotational deployment of US Marines to Darwin as part of its rebalance policy.

Domestic political and economic considerations impact the alliance, however. First, the alliance is uneven, with the United States shouldering the bulk of the physical assets and financial responsibilities of the alliance. Australia is unwilling to boost its defense budget to the level that the United States desires. The Australian Defense Force (ADF) is quite small, with only 52,000 regular troops and 20,000 reserves. Hence, Australia's contribution to US forces in the region would likely be limited to support. Second, China's economic and military rise has affected US-Australian relations. Like the other countries in the region, Australia increasingly looks to China for its economic prosperity, while looking to the United States for its military security. Australia,

like other nations in the Asia-Pacific, does not want to choose sides between the United States and China. Although Australia historically has supported the United States in military actions across the globe, the government and people of Australia may hesitate to assist United States against China if the benefits are not clear to Australia.

#### US Naval Diplomacy with Southeast Asia: Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam

The US seeks alliances with Japan, South Korea and Australia for power aggregation. The symbiotic nature of these alliances ensures that these countries can act as force multipliers for each other's military operations in the Asia-Pacific. US naval diplomacy in Southeast Asia is different. Rather than seek alliances for power aggregation, the United States maintains alliances and engages in naval diplomacy in Southeast Asia in support of its operations in a potential conflict. Such support comprises facilitating military operations, engaging in burden sharing, and enhancing US stability projection in the Asia-Pacific. Rather than being interested in the military hardware that the aforesaid countries bring to the table, the United States finds the countries' strategic locations key to offering the potential to facilitate future military operations.

Militarily, America has long-standing ties with the Philippines. The US has a 65-year old alliance with the Philippines, but has not stationed troops there since the 1980s when the Philippines rejected a treaty to allow the US to maintain its naval base in Subic Bay and Clark Air Base. Signed in 2014 between the United States and the Aquino administration, a Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) allows the US to deploy Marines to the Philippines and increase the presence of aircraft and naval ships to Philippines facilities. It allows Manila to retain control of its bases and grants the US some existing bases on a rotational basis. Subic Bay used to be the US Navy's largest base outside the continental United States. Clark Air Base had been the

epicenter of American air power in the Western Pacific. Both military installations have become commercial economic entities after the US departure. Manila is banking on a restored American presence at Clark and Subic Bay, to provide deterrence against Chinese aggression and to enhance US-Philippines security alliance. The pact stands to enhance US power in the region. The accord will give the United States a stronghold less than 500 miles from islands built by the Chinese, from which American troops can help train Philippine forces, construct military facilities and deploy planes and ships.

In 2016, however, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte expressed his desire to scrap the EDCA. He also halted joint patrols in the South China Sea, claiming that he did not want the Philippines to be seen a hostile to parties there.<sup>20</sup> Earlier, Duterte had called on the United States to remove Special Forces in southern Philippines, where the government has been fighting Muslim rebels for decades. Perhaps most bizarre and unsettling, Duterte announced that he was considering buying military hardware from Russia and China rather than the United States. In fall 2016, Duterte also announced that the 2016 US-Philippines military exercises will be the last between the two countries. On an October 2016 visit to China, Duterte announced a separation from the United States in favor of Russia and China. Duterte visited China soon after an international tribunal handed him a victory in a dispute with China over claims to territories in the South China Sea. Rather than press his claims against a stronger China, Duterte went to Beijing seeking cooperation. Duterte appears to believe that the United States, despite the 65-year alliance, would not be willing to defend the Philippines against China. It may be that be, and many others in the Philippines, are simply be unwilling to risk involving their nation in a war between China and the United States. Whatever his thinking, it appears Duterte calculated that it is better to engage China rather than

confront it. His ploy worked, and Duterte walked away from the visit with \$9 billion in low-interest loans from Beijing.

Despite these pronouncements, the Philippines Ministry of Defense claimed that Philippines-US defense ties remained “rock solid.”<sup>21</sup> In return, US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter described the US-Philippine defense treaty with Philippines to be “iron clad.”<sup>22</sup> In January 2017, the Philippine’s top defense official stated that the US military could begin upgrading and constructing facilities in the Philippines that year, a reversal of Duterte’s rejection of US military troops there.

Duterte accompanied his verbal shift from the United States with an attempt to bolster maritime cooperation with Japan. In October 2016, Duterte stated that he would welcome Japanese naval patrols in the South China Sea, and that the Philippines would lease five surveillance planes from Japan. Manila is already leasing two patrol vessels from Japan.

Singapore is a vital part of US naval diplomacy in Asia, and the US Navy has had a presence in Singapore since the 1960s. In recent decades, the United States has brought Singapore more deeply into the US security framework by deploying troops and equipment to that city-state. Singapore provides logistical support for the US Navy under pacts inked in 1990 and 2005. The 1990 agreement allows the US military to use facilities in Singapore. After the U.S.-Philippine treaty on military bases expired in 1991, the US stepped up military cooperation with Singapore. In 2001, Singapore completed construction of a deep-draft pier at Changi Naval Base. Since 2012, the United States has stationed four littoral combat ships at Changi, greatly expanding the US forward maritime presence in Southeast Asia. More than 100 US Navy ships call in at Singapore each year.

For more than two decades, the United States and Singapore have carried out joint maritime exercises, called Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) Singapore, to provide both navies with training and enhanced interoperability. In late 2015, the United States and Singapore signed an enhanced defense cooperation agreement (DCA). The pact expands cooperation in five areas, in the military, policy, strategic and technology spheres, along with cooperation against non-traditional security threats such as terrorism and piracy. Both countries also agreed to enhance collaboration in new areas including humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, cybersecurity, biosecurity and public communications. The enhanced DCA also introduced new high-level dialogues between the two sides.<sup>23</sup> In a separate move, Singapore in December 2015 allowed the US Navy to operate P-8 Poseidon surveillance planes from Singapore's airfields, enabling the United States to gather intelligence on China's military activity in the South China Sea.<sup>24</sup>

Compared to its maritime relations with the Philippines and Singapore, the US Navy's ties with Vietnam are still nascent and have focused primarily on confidence-building through noncombat exercises. US Navy ships began port calls in 2004. Since then, US Navy port visits have averaged once per year. Since 2008, the United States and Vietnam have held annual bilateral defense and security talks. Much to Vietnam's pleasure, the United States in 2010 declared that FON in the South China Sea to be in its national interest. US Secretary of State John Kerry backed up these words with action when he announced in 2013 that Washington would provide Vietnam with \$18 million and five fast patrol boats to improve its coast guard's ability to properly police its waters.

In 2010, the United States and Vietnam inaugurated an annual series of naval engagement activities (NEA). These low-level exercises involve skills exchanges in military medicine, search and rescue, and maritime security. The 2015 NEA involved subject matter experts focusing on

maritime domain awareness, shipboard damage control, submarine rescue, legal symposia, band concerts, community service events and team sports. An at-sea phase allowed ships from both navies to practice the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) and ship handling.<sup>25</sup> The purpose of the naval activities is to foster mutual understanding, build confidence in the maritime domain and develop relationships between the people and navies of both nations. In a nod to deepening bilateral ties on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of normalizing diplomatic relations, Vietnam in 2015 hosted the largest ever US-led Pacific Partnership mission for Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR). The Pacific Partnership is an annual multilateral event in which the navies of participant countries engage in a variety of local outreach efforts to improve boost capabilities, build relationships and bolster collective ability to respond to natural disasters.<sup>26</sup>

China and Vietnam have a long history of animosity. Vietnam was one of China's tribute states, and China invaded Vietnam briefly in 1979. In recent decades, China and Vietnam have been engaged in maritime disputes and military engagements. They include a brief but fierce sea battle near the disputed Paracels in 1974, in which China killed more than 70 Vietnamese sailors, and seized the islands. In 1988, China and Vietnam clashed in the Spratlys, with Vietnam losing about 60 sailors. Chinese PLAN ships sabotaged two Vietnamese operation in 2012, which led to large anti-China protests in Vietnam and violence against ethnic Chinese residents of Vietnam. In May 2014, a Chinese drilling rig entered the waters near the Paracels led to several collisions between Vietnamese and Chinese ships. Today, China and Vietnam dispute claims to some of the Spratly islands.

Despite these tensions, Vietnam does not want antagonistic relations with Beijing. Like its Asian neighbors, Vietnam relies heavily on China for its economic prosperity. China is Vietnam's largest trading partner. Two-way trade totaled nearly \$60 billion in 2014. China is the ninth largest

investor in Vietnam.<sup>27</sup> Chinese tourism is also on the rise in Vietnam, bring in valuable revenue. It appears that Beijing is finding that it is easier to attract bees with honey than vinegar. In January 2017, Vietnam President Truong visited Beijing, and the two leaders issued a communique stressing their mutual trust and deepening their cooperative relationships.

China continues to be Vietnam's the largest source of foreign aid, which has contributed greatly to Vietnam's industrialization. While Vietnam is wary of China's rising political and military clout, it also benefits tremendously from China's economic prosperity.

### US Naval Diplomacy with India

Consistent with the DOD's 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review, the United States seeks to bring the Indian Ocean into its Asia-Pacific policy by deepening political and security ties with India. The United States is assertively courting India. Initially reluctant to choose sides between the US and China, India is increasingly concerned that China is attempting to create a China-centric geopolitical order in Asia. In a meeting with President Obama in early 2015, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi appeared to tilt toward the United States.<sup>28</sup> In 2015, Washington and Delhi released a joint strategic vision, agreeing to ensure FON and overflight, especially in the South China Sea.<sup>29</sup> In April 2016, the United States and India agreed to allow the two countries' militaries to use each other's bases for replenishment and repair. The United States and India are in the midst of talks to coproduce advanced military hardware in India.

In late 2015, India began a naval diplomacy campaign to foster closer ties with Japan, Australia and Vietnam. It appears that the campaign is designed to counter China's expansion in the South China Sea. If the three countries were to join in some sort of coalition or alliance, they could surround China from the northern and southern regions of the Indian Ocean.

### **Alliance Building beyond Collaborative Naval Diplomacy**

The above discussion outlines some US efforts at collaborative naval diplomacy and coalition building in the Asia-Pacific. According to British scholar of sea power Geoffrey Till, collaborative naval diplomacy and coalition building is a range of activity intended to secure foreign policy objectives not by threatening potential adversaries but by influencing the behavior of allies and potentially friendly bystanders.<sup>30</sup> Hence, it is a policy of inducement, rather than outright use of force. The United States and its allies and friends in the region are actively engaged in collaborative naval diplomacy and some level of coalition building. Alliances are a step beyond cooperation and collaboration, however. In international relations, an alliance is a formal agreement between two or more states for mutual support in the case of war. Alliance provides for combined action of two or more states. Under such an arrangement, individual states are stronger in union with other states, and that union may be a deterrent to military action on the part of adversaries. Alliances are key arrangements in balance of power politics. In an anarchical world system, no supranational power exists to maintain international order. In such a world system, individual nation-states seek to protect their security by maximizing their power. Some states are weaker than others, and engage in alliances to supplement their strength. Alliance building among nation states would at least require some common goal, or a potential or real adversary in common that would draw the countries together. For instance, the Allied powers came together in the Second World War against the Axis powers, and Western European countries came together in the creation of NATO after that war to stop or deter the expansion of Soviet communism. Put simply, the adage “The enemy of my enemy is my friend” explains the impetus for alliance building.

Throughout history, the most common motive for alliance building has been the desire to prevent any nation from gaining dominant power.

These prerequisites to alliance building do not yet exist, or are largely absent, in the Asia-Pacific. While it appears that China threatens to upset the existing order in the Asia-Pacific, not all countries there are convinced that the threat exists, that China threatens their national interests or national security, that the United States is committed to the region, or that an alliance with other countries in the region serves their interests.

The United States proposed a naval alliance in the Asia-Pacific as early as 1989. That year, President George H.W. Bush proposed a “new Pacific partnership,” which called for continued American engagement in the region's politics, commerce, and security. It called for sharing of global responsibilities with Japan and a new mechanism to increase economic cooperation throughout the Pacific Rim. In the early 1990s, President Bill Clinton similarly proposed the concept of organizing the region into a “Pacific community.” Initial enthusiasm among APEC countries faded after they detected arrogance in Washington's attempt to reshape the region in its own best interests. They particularly opposed Clinton's desire to create an Asian-Pacific free trade zone like NAFTA in the Western Hemisphere. Asian countries apparently welcomed US involvements in the region, but not US weight. President Obama tried his hand at alliance building in November 2010 when he visited the Asian democracies of Japan, Indonesia, South Korea and India, but not China. In late 2015, Obama took a six nation tour of Asia designed to underscore US commitment to the region, emphasizing the US role in maintaining FON in the region. None of these efforts over the past twenty-five years have resulted in a multilateral maritime alliance.

Is time ripe for a regional multilateral maritime alliance system? The key players in such an alliance would be the United States, Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, Singapore, Vietnam and India. Each of these states would need to have an incentive to join the others in an alliance. Let's begin with Japan, which is America's closest maritime ally in the region. Japan faces significant social and economic problems, which would likely limit its ability to dedicate the human and financial resources necessary for participating in a maritime alliance that had any real power. Its demographics raise questions about Japan's military readiness. Japan's fertility rate well is below replacement rate. As a result, Japan is losing population, and the population that exists is graying. Japan's median age is 46.5 years, with the largest concentration of people being in the 40 to 44 years and the 65-69 years of age groups.<sup>31</sup> Japan's economy continues to struggle. Between 2011 and 2014, Japan's economy grew on average only 0.79 percent.<sup>32</sup> Anticipated economic expansion was derailed in 2015 by a sharp slowdown in demand from China and other Asian countries and sluggish private consumption. As a result, Japan's defense budget increases have been incremental; the 2016 defense budget increase is only 1.5 percent. Because of the sluggish economy, an aging population, and a political environment that largely rejects re-militarization, Japan is not likely to become a maritime power able to exercise convincing naval diplomacy on its own. However, the Chinese threat to Japan's interests in Asia remains an important factor driving Japan's naval diplomacy. Japan may not be strong enough to deter China, or North Korea, alone, but may be more persuasive in concert with other maritime forces in the region. Because of animosity since the Second World War, however, some countries, such as Korea, are reluctant to cooperate too closely with Japan. Political relations between Japan and Korea are strained, as Korean politicians generally do not have warm feelings toward Japan, a former colonizer of the peninsula. Moreover, South Korea's proximity to China is an issue. It is reluctant to be squeezed

between China on one side and Japan and the United States on the other. It enjoys strong economic relations with China, which it does not want to jeopardize by courting Japan or by supporting Japan's claims in the East China Sea. Furthermore, Korea does not have great interests in the South China Sea, so it has little incentive to support US FONOPs there. Korea has little to gain from an alliance with Japan because Japan has little to offer Korea. The world's 11th largest economy, Korea already possesses economic power and the seapower to support it. It does not appear likely that Korea would risk relations with China for better ones with Japan.

There is a lot of opportunity for the United States to deepen naval diplomacy with Vietnam. When Russia's lease on Cam Ranh Bay was about to expire in the early 2000s, Vietnam informally discussed granting the United States access to the naval base, which it had used during the Vietnam Conflict. At the time the United States demurred, concerned about China's reaction. China's parking of an oil exploration rig in Vietnam's continental shelf and Beijing's intimidation of Vietnam's navy seems to have convinced Hanoi that closer naval relations with the United States might be a good thing.

There also appears to be interest between Vietnam and the Philippines in deepening bilateral military cooperation. They have held informal discussion on setting up joint patrols in the South China Sea and have carried out goodwill port of calls in each other's countries. In November 2015, Vietnam and the Philippines signed a joint statement elevating their relationship to a "strategic partnership." The agreement is aimed at boosting bilateral ties on defense, trade and maritime cooperation as well as greater cooperation between their militaries. In signing the agreement, the two sides singled out China's land reclamation projects in the South China Sea and the importance of maintaining FON as a mutual area of concern.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps most peculiar, the Philippines, once brutalized by the Japanese military, would now welcome Japanese naval patrols of the South China

Sea. Japan's complaint with China is in the East China Sea, however, so it is not clear if Japan is seriously considering this option. More concrete, however, is the possibility that Japan will donate planes to the Philippines for patrols in the South China Sea.

In India, Modi's government appears to welcome Washington's expansion of rebalancing to include the Indian Ocean. While New Delhi appears hesitant to antagonize China by overtly embracing US rebalancing in South Asia, this hesitation may dissolve if India perceives that China's growing seapower threatens India's national interests in the region. For instance, because more than 50 percent of its eastbound trade passes through the South China Sea, India is wary of any move that China would make that would threaten FON there. As a result, India's interests in the South China Sea may encourage Delhi to cooperate or ally with similarly interested parties, such as the Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam.

## **Conclusion**

No doubt there has been an increase in naval diplomacy activities among US allies and friends in the past decade. The uptick appears to be in response to China's rise and its actions that appear to threaten the post-Second World War order in the maritime Asia-Pacific. As part of US rebalance policy to Asia, Washington will base 60 percent of US naval assets in the Asia-Pacific by 2020. At the same time, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Vietnam, the Philippines and India all endeavor to enhance their naval presence and capabilities. The United States is fortunate that it is able to build on bilateral maritime security arrangements that it has had in place for decades. In addition to bilateral ties with the United States, all of the aforementioned states are reaching out to each other, creating a web of bilateral naval ties. The creation of a multilateral maritime security alliance is stymied either by historical baggage that hinders alliances among some states or the lack of a

common threat that would bring them all together. It appears that, with the exception of South Korea, China's expansion in the Asia-Pacific perturbs the countries examined in this paper. This common concern may drive the countries to seek an alliance to restore the balance of power in the region. Much depends on how far China goes in asserting its sovereignty in the Asia-Pacific. It is possible that, faced with increased diplomacy-building among maritime states in Asia, China will determine that time is not on its side and will move faster, rather than slower, in activities and projects in the East and South China Sea in support of its territorial claims. Increased aggression on the part of Beijing would likely spur more defensive naval activity on the part of the US and countries mentioned in this paper. Until they unite efforts to deter China's aggression, the Asia-Pacific -- particularly in the South China Sea, will become increasingly crowded with ships of the respective navies. At some point, this crowding would become counter-productive as a deterrent to China, making accidents more likely. It would make sense to coordinate efforts into a multilateral security regime, even if it were just to relieve the chaos due to overcrowding in the Asia-Pacific.

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## Endnotes

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