

Featured *MSP Perspectives*:

Going to the Brink in the South China Sea

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By Sam Bateman



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Recent months have seen increased military activities in the South China Sea, particularly by the US and China, but also by India and Japan. These activities are heightening tensions and taking the region to the brink of dangerous confrontations and even conflict.

In a recent serious incident, on 17 May two Chinese fighter jets intercepted a US Navy EP-3 intelligence and surveillance aircraft about 50 nautical miles east of Hainan. This incident could have violated procedures agreed between the US and China to manage such encounters and prevent their escalation. It follows earlier incidents when Chinese jet fighters intercepted American surveillance aircraft over the South China and Yellow seas.

The US recently conducted its third freedom of navigation operation (FONOP) in the area since China started building its artificial islands in the Spratlys group. This involved an American warship sailing close by Fiery Cross Reef, which is claimed by China. In March, the US sent a task group, comprising the aircraft carrier USS John C. Stennis, two destroyers, two cruisers and a Japan-based US Seventh Fleet flagship into the contested waters of the South China Sea, to counter the presence of China.

President Obama during his visit to Vietnam in May announced that the US would be lifting its long-standing ban on sales of lethal military equipment to Vietnam as part of a strategy to help Vietnam defend itself against an increasing threat from China in the South China Sea. In return, Vietnam might grant the United States access to Cam Ranh Bay. Along with US military access to bases in Palawan in the Philippines, this would markedly enhance America's ability to project military power into the South China Sea.

What is significant with recent American naval activities in the region is that Washington has chosen to announce them with a blaze of publicity. This suggests a clear intention to confront China and to show the world that the US is doing so.

India added to tensions recently when it sent a force of four naval vessels into the South China Sea for a two-and-a-half-month-long deployment, which includes participation in Exercise Malabar off Okinawa, jointly with the US Navy and the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF). Predictably Beijing reacted strongly to this naval deployment, saying that New Delhi should not encourage Tokyo and Washington to bring added tensions to the region.

In May, a Chinese strike group of three guided-missile destroyers, two frigates and a supply ship, in addition to a submarine and aircraft carrier, conducted exercises in the South China Sea. This group patrolled off Chinese-controlled reefs in the Spratlys, including Fiery Cross Reef one day before the American FONOP near that reef. These activities appeared to be a response to earlier activities by the USS Stennis task group.

All this is looking like dangerous brinkmanship. All the major powers in the South China Sea are trying to achieve an advantageous outcome by pushing dangerous events to the brink of something more serious. This brinkmanship only serves to increase tensions and add to the strategic distrust that pervades the region at present.

China's past record suggests that China is prepared to go to the brink. But it is unlikely to be China that goes over the brink. It is more likely to be one of the countries taking China to the brink. China with a 'home ground' advantage and numerous military and civil assets in the region can readily create a situation where one of the other parties will be forced to fire the 'first shot' or to back down. Hopefully, however, current rules of engagement (ROE) don't allow a 'first shot' to be fired, but we cannot be sure.

Significantly, the countries that are taking China to the brink are extra regional players with often overstated strategic interests in the South China Sea. They are 'burning their boats behind them' with nowhere to go other than to back down or fire the 'first shot'. They have no concept of an end game other than compelling China to back down and follow their 'rule of law'. But that is not going to happen.

Unfortunately, no existing regional forum has been prepared so far to address the implications of greater military activity in the South China Sea and the increased tensions that result. Currently the sovereignty disputes attract greater attention. This obsession with sovereignty leads to a situation where sovereignty is not just an obstacle to effective management of the South China Sea and activities within it, but also to any preparedness to address measures to demilitarize the sea.

Demilitarizing the South China Sea should be an objective of all stakeholders. To this end, China should clarify its claims in the South China Sea and refrain from activities that might be seen as assertive or aggressive. Similarly, it would be helpful if India, Japan and the US 'backed off' from their current military activities lest the region continue down a track that could lead to more serious incidents and even conflict.

This perspective is based on the author's "Brinkmanship in the South China Sea helps nobody", published with the *East Asia Forum*, 7 June 2016 (click [here](#)).



SINGAPORE | 28 JUNE | TODAY (SINGAPORE)

RSN frigate is first non-US Navy ship to lead multinational group sail

A Republic of Singapore Navy (RSN) frigate has become the first non-US Navy (USN) ship to lead a Multinational Group Sail to participate in the world's largest international maritime exercise, according to a statement from the Ministry of Defence on Tuesday (June 28).

[Full Report](#)

THE PHILIPPINES | 2 JUNE | THE MANILA TIMES

'ENEMY AT OUR DOORSTEP': Navy chief seeks urgent defense upgrade

The commander of the Philippine Navy said the country needs to focus on territorial defense urgently, warning that the enemy "stands at our doorstep."

[Full Report](#)

SOUTH KOREA AND VIETNAM | 5 JUNE | REUTERS

INTERVIEW-Vietnam, South Korea may buy Lockheed planes amid Chinese buildup

Vietnam and South Korea are looking seriously at buying refurbished Lockheed Martin Corp P-3 and S-3 maritime surveillance planes to counter China's military buildup and repeated North Korean missile launches, the company said.

[Full Report](#)

THAILAND | 6 JUNE | BANGKOK POST

Joint drill ushers military unity

The three-month "Navy 2016" drill, from late March to last Thursday, has made important marks in military cooperation, with the navy and the air force engaging for the first time in the same exercise involving.

[Full Report](#)

CHINA | 7 JUNE | PEOPLE'S DAILY ONLINE

Another two lighthouses, one hospital on Nansha Islands to be launched

China is expected to unveil two more lighthouses on Nansha Islands in the South China Sea by the end of the year and a hospital on one of its reefs will be put into operation by June.

[Full Report](#)

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SOUTH KOREA | 8 JUNE | YONHAP

S. Korea conducts maritime drills to protect Dokdo

South Korea's military and coast guard on Wednesday began two-day maritime drills aimed at better safeguarding the country's easternmost islets of Dokdo, amid Japan's persistent sovereignty claim.

[Full Report](#)

CHINA-JAPAN | 9 JUNE | REUTERS

Japan protests after Chinese warship sails near disputed East China Sea islands

Japan summoned the Chinese ambassador early on Thursday to express concern after a Chinese navy ship sailed close to what Japan considers its territorial waters in the East China Sea for the first time, increasing tensions over the disputed area.

[Full Report](#)

INDIA-JAPAN-UNITED STATES | 10 JUNE | THE PIONEER

India, US, Japan begin 9-day Naval exercise

India, US and Japan on Thursday began a nine-day long Malabar series of annual joint naval exercises off Japan.

[Full Report](#)

JAPAN | 10 MAY | THE JAPAN TIMES

MSDF emerges as option to help coast guard protect Senkakus

The first Chinese warship to cruise by waters near the Senkaku Islands has prompted Japan to look into the possibility of mobilizing the Self-Defense Forces for maritime police duties.

[Full Report](#)

CHINA-JAPAN | 15 JUNE | THE JAPAN TIMES

Chinese spy ship enters Japan's territorial waters for second time since end of WWII

A Chinese navy reconnaissance vessel entered Japanese territorial waters near Kuchinoerabu Island off Kagoshima Prefecture early Wednesday morning — the first time since 2004 that a Chinese military ship has done so.

[Full Report](#)

UNITED STATES | 15 JUNE | REUTERS

U.S. Third Fleet expands East Asia role as tensions rise with China

The U.S. Navy's Third Fleet will send more ships to East Asia to operate outside its normal theater alongside the Japan-based Seventh Fleet, a U.S. official said on Tuesday, a move that comes at a time of heightened tensions with China.

[Full Report](#)

CHINA-INDONESIA | 19 JUNE | REUTERS

Indonesian navy fires on Chinese boat, Beijing says one injured

An Indonesian naval vessel fired on a Chinese fishing boat on Friday, injuring one person, China's foreign ministry said, the countries' third reported confrontation this year near a chain of islands as regional tensions mount in the South China Sea.

[Full Report](#)

INDONESIA | 28 JUNE | JAKARTA GLOBE

House Agrees to Build Military Base on Natuna Islands

House of Representatives Commission I deputy chairman Hanafi Rais said the legislature reached agreement on the government's proposal to build a military base on the Natuna Islands in Riau Islands province.

[Full Report](#)

NORTH KOREA | 28 JUNE | YONHAP

N. Korea equipping its border patrol boats with U.S. Gatling guns

North Korea has started to equip its border patrol boats with U.S.-made Gatling machine guns, military sources said Tuesday.

[Full Report](#)

JAPAN-SOUTH KOREA-UNITED STATES | 29 JUNE | THE MAINICHI

Japan, U.S., S. Korea hold joint missile-tracking exercise in Hawaii

The naval forces of the United States, South Korea and Japan concluded an eight-day, trilateral missile-tracking exercise off Hawaii on Tuesday, amid continuing ballistic missile launches by North Korea that have increased tension in the Asia-Pacific region.

[Full Report](#)



AP/Philippine Star

INDONESIA-MALAYSIA-PHILIPPINES | 21 JUNE | ANTARA

Indonesia, Malaysia, and Philippines discuss implementation of coordinated patrols

Indonesian, Malaysian, and Philippine defense ministers met in Manila on Monday to discuss the implementation of coordinated patrols on the shared maritime territories susceptible to piracy and other transnational crimes, the Indonesian Defense Ministry stated.

[Full Report](#)

INDONESIA | 1 JUNE | TEMPO

Minister Susi Endorses Use of Force Against Illegal Fishing

Marine Affairs and Fisheries Minister Susi Pudjiastuti has expressed her support for the action taken by Oswald Siahaan (OWA)-354 frigate that fired shots at and seized Chinese-flagged Gui Bei Yu boat for allegedly fishing illegally in Natuna Sea.

[Full Report](#)

MALAYSIA-PHILIPPINES-UNITED STATES | 3 JUNE | THE PHILIPPINE STAR

Phi, Malaysia to launch naval drill in Sulu Sea

The joint navies of the Philippines, United States and Malaysia will launch a naval drill starting tomorrow in the Sulu Sea.

[Full Report](#)

NEW ZEALAND | 5 JUNE | SCOOP.CO.NZ

NZDF deploys for Pacific Islands fisheries patrols

The Royal New Zealand Navy offshore patrol vessel HMNZS Otago will sail from the Devonport Naval Base at 4pm today, bound for the south west Pacific to conduct fisheries patrols and port visits over the next two months.

[Full Report](#)

PHILIPPINES | 5 JUNE | THE PHILIPPINE STAR

'Tubbataha' is PCG's newest ship

The Philippine Coast Guard's first ship from Japan has been named "Tubbataha," a PCG official announced yesterday.

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CHINA-UNITED STATES | 8 JUNE | CNN

U.S.: Chinese jet makes 'unsafe' intercept of Air Force plane

A U.S. Air Force RC-135 reconnaissance aircraft flying Tuesday in international airspace over the East China Sea was intercepted in an "unsafe manner" by a Chinese J-10 fighter jet, several defense officials tell CNN.

[Full Report](#)

CHINA-SOUTH KOREA | 9 JUNE | KOREA TIMES

Navy, marines called on to bust illegal Chinese fishing

Political parties are mounting calls for the military to dispatch Navy ships carrying marines to the West Sea to stop illegal fishing by Chinese boats in South Korean waters.

[Full Report](#)



PHILIPPINES | 10 JUNE | MANILA BULLETIN

PH to use BRP Gregorio Velasquez to map maritime domains

The Philippine Navy (PN) formally welcomed Friday the country's first dedicated marine research vessel, BRP Gregorio Velasquez (AGR 702).

[Full Report](#)

INDONESIA | 12 JUNE | JAKARTA GLOBE

Indonesia Intercepts, Releases Australia-Bound Boat Carrying Asylum Seekers

Authorities in Aceh intercepted a boat carrying at least 35 Sri Lankan asylum seekers bound for Australia on Saturday (11/06) but refused to arrest them for immigration violation or have their refugee status processed on shore.

[Full Report](#)

INDIA | 15 JUNE | THE TIMES OF INDIA

10 coastal police stations empowered to probe cases up to EEZ

To end the ambiguity over jurisdiction in the wake of Italian marines case, 10 police stations located along

India's coastline have been empowered to register and investigate crimes committed within the country's exclusive economic zone (EEZ).

[Full Report](#)

INDIA | 16 JUNE | THE TIMES OF INDIA

Maritime terrorism a big threat, says Rajnath

Maritime terrorism is a big threat with huge economic implications and the government is carrying out a security audit of all major and non major ports to identify vulnerable points in coastal security, Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh said today.

[Full Report](#)

CHINA-VIETNAM | 17 JUNE | REUTERS

China deploys ships to help Vietnam find missing coastguard plane

China sent ships on Friday in response to a request from Vietnam to help find a coastguard plane that crashed with nine personnel aboard while looking for a missing fighter jet and pilot, Vietnam's defense ministry said.

[Full Report](#)

INDONESIA-MALAYSIA-PHILIPPINES | 20 JUNE | REUTERS

Three southeast Asian nations to designate shipping corridor in piracy battle

Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines on Monday agreed to designate a transit corridor for commercial vessels crossing a maritime zone hit by a spate of hijackings by Islamist militants in the southern Philippines.

[Full Report](#)

SOUTH KOREA | 22 JUNE | YONHAP

S. Korea's Coast Guard stations 5,000-ton patrol ship south of Jeju

South Korea's Coast Guard stationed its largest patrol vessel off Jeju Island to better guard its territorial waters and deal with illegal fishing activities, the Ministry of Public Safety and Security said Wednesday.

[Full Report](#)

INDONESIA | 24 JUNE | REUTERS

Indonesia says coal on hold for Philippines after seven sailors abducted

Indonesia said on Friday a halt on coal shipments to the Philippines will remain in place until Manila can secure its waters after seven Indonesian sailors were kidnapped, the latest in a string of abductions.

[Full Report](#)



SINGAPORE | 27 JUNE | MARITIME EXECUTIVE

Singapore container terminal to host living lab

PSA Corporation and the Port Authority of Singapore have set up a “living lab” at Singapore’s Pasir Panjang Terminal. With the support of Singapore’s Economic Development Board, the S\$100 million (\$73 million) project will run for three years and will enable start-ups and technology providers to test-bed systems at two operational berths.

[Full Report](#)

CHINA | 7 JUNE | MARITIME EXECUTIVE

COSCO launches world’s largest tanker company

On Monday, China COSCO Shipping officially launched the world's largest tanker company with a ceremony in Shanghai. COSCO Shipping Energy Transportation will be the top tanker firm both by tonnage and by ship count, with 105 vessels of a combined 17 million dwt, valued at about one tenth of China COSCO's assets. It boasts some 200 domestic and overseas customers in oil and gas.

[Full Report](#)

SINGAPORE | 9 JUNE | SPLASH 24/7

Otto Marine bags Indonesia product tanker order

Singapore’s Otto Marine, currently *the subject of a takeover bid* from controlling shareholder Yaw Chee Siew, has secured a shipbuilding contract from an Indonesian state-owned enterprise for a 6,500dwt product tanker.

[Full Report](#)

CHINA-INDONESIA | 14 JUNE | SPLASH 24/7

China’s Hilong wins Indonesia offshore contract

Chinese offshore engineering firm Hilong Group has announced that Hilong Oil Service & Engineering has been awarded an offshore installation contract by Indonesian ECPI company Timas Suplindo.

[Full Report](#)

PAKISTAN | 14 JUNE | DAILY TIMES

South Asia failing to make shipbreaking environmentally friendly: UN officer

Experts and government representatives on Monday pledged to jointly tackle degradation of marine and coastal ecosystems in the country caused by “environmentally-damaging and unsustainable” ship-recycling activities in the Gadani shipbreaking yard.

[Full Report](#)

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KOREA | 17 JUNE | HELLENIC SHIPPING NEWS

Korean banks opt for cliff-hanging loan relief for Samsung Heavy Industries

In a rare move to keep troubled company on its toes, Korean commercial banks are opting to grant life line for three months instead of typical one year when rolling over debt dues for Samsung Heavy Industries.

[Full Report](#)

UNITED STATES | 21 JUNE | SPLASH 24/7

BOEM to release stricter offshore clean-up rules

The US Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) is close to announcing new plans for ensuring that offshore oil and gas producers meet their financial liabilities when it comes to disposing of old rigs.

[Full Report](#)

GLOBAL | 21 JUNE | WORLD CARGO NEWS

UK P&I and Britannia Clubs terminate merger

The merger of the Britannia Club and the UK P&I Club has been called off before being put to membership votes.

[Full Report](#)

MYANMAR | 21 JUNE | SPLASH 24/7

Myanmar offshore supply base nears government approval

Myanmar Offshore Supply Base (MOSB) is expected to be granted approval by Myanmar's Investment Commission to develop an offshore supply base at Mawlamyine, in Mon State, according to local reports.

[Full Report](#)

AUSTRALIA | 23 JUNE | REUTERS

Lenders turn away BHP port debt plan, wary of coal

Australian mining giant BHP Billiton pulled a \$500 million debt refinancing plan at one of Australia's biggest coal export terminals after banks were reluctant to lend to the sector, said three sources with knowledge of the process.

[Full Report](#)



MALAYSIA-CHINA | 25 JUNE | BERNAMA

Malaysia expands port ties with China

Malaysia and China have expanded port alliance with the signing of memorandum of understanding (MOU) between Kuantan Port Authority and the Port of Huizhou.

[Full Report](#)

SINGAPORE | 25 JUNE | THE STRAITS TIMES

Three new Earn and Learn Programmes launched for the maritime sector

Three new Skills Future Earn and Learn Programmes (ELP) were launched for the maritime sector at the PSA building on Friday.

[Full Report](#)

EUROPEAN UNION | 28 JUNE | REUTERS

EU to accept antitrust offer from Maersk, MSC, 13 others-sources

EU antitrust regulators are set to accept an offer from world No.1 container liner Maersk, Swiss peer MSC and 13 other shipping firms to change their pricing methods to end a five-year probe, three people familiar with the matter said on Tuesday.

[Full Report](#)

CHINA-CENTRAL AMERICA | 29 JUNE | HELLENIC SHIPPING NEWS

Coscocs chairman Xu launches Cosco Shipping Lines Central America and Panama

Cosco China Shipping Group Chairman Xu Lirong has launched the new lines of business of the company: Cosco Shipping Lines (Central America) Inc and Cosco Shipping Lines (Panama) Inc, in Panama.

[Full Report](#)

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES | 29 JUNE | SEATRADE MARITIME

Good news for shipowners in landmark OW Bunker UAE ruling

The UAE Federal Supreme Court has ruled that a bunker supplier, contracted by OW Bunker before the Danish firm's sudden and tumultuous demise in late 2014, has no right to recourse against the cache of owners/charterers for unpaid bills.

[Full Report](#)