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## **Enforcing International Law in the South China Sea: Can Southeast Asia Keep China in Check?**

*By Michael Beckley*

### **Synopsis**

*Contrary to the predictions of many analysts, China is hardly poised to establish naval domination over the South China Sea. The states of Southeast Asia hold significant advantages vis-à-vis China in the maritime domain, though the Philippines remains a weak link.*

### **Commentary**

ON 12 JULY 2016 a tribunal in The Hague rebuked China's expansive claim to sovereignty over the South China Sea. Laws, however, are not self-enforcing, and China has made clear that it will not be bound by the rulings of a "puppet" court half a world away.

Many analysts believe China will eventually take control of the South China Sea and impose its own version of the Monroe Doctrine. How close is China to achieving this goal?

### **China's Hardly Hegemonic Naval Power**

In the past 150 years, only two nations have achieved regional maritime hegemony: Japan for a brief period in the 1930s and early 1940s; and the United States from the 1890s to the present. The US and Japanese cases suggest China would need two things to enforce its claim to the South China Sea: a regional monopoly of naval power and a military presence on the landmasses surrounding the Sea.

The US and imperial Japanese navies accounted for 90 to 100 percent of the naval tonnage in their respective regions, and both nations strung military bases around

their maritime domains and forcibly prevented their neighbors from amassing naval power.

China today is nowhere close to achieving this level of dominance. China's navy accounts for less than 30 percent of Asia's naval tonnage, and China's maritime neighbors are collectively matching increases in Chinese military spending and holdings of modern submarines, ships, aircraft, and coast guard vessels.

### **Sources of Southeast Asia's Maritime Strength**

China's military, of course, is far more powerful than that of any Southeast Asian nation, but Southeast Asian nations are closer than China to the portions of the South China Sea that they claim. In a war there, China would need to cycle forces between the combat theatre and a small number of bases hundreds of miles away in southern China.

Southeast Asian nations, by contrast, could use their home territory as a base of operations for shore-based missile batteries, diesel-powered attack submarines, swarms of small surface combatants and fighter aircraft armed with antiship missiles, and mines. In essence, the same type of geographic and technological factors that would help China fend off the US military in a war within a few hundred kilometres of China's territory can help Southeast Asian nations fend off China near their territories.

Most Southeast Asian nations have capitalised on these advantages by developing counter-intervention capabilities near contested features. In fact, the western and southern sections of the South China Sea are now bordered by forces capable of denying China sea and air command.

On the west side of the Sea, Vietnam has acquired mobile shore-based antiship cruise missile batteries, Kilo-class submarines, S-300 surface-to-air missiles, and dozens of fighter aircraft and surface ships armed with supersonic cruise missiles. Collectively, these platforms enable Vietnam to destroy ships and aircraft operating within 200 miles of its coast – an area that encompasses the western third of the South China Sea and China's military base on Hainan Island.

On the south side, Indonesia and Malaysia have developed similar capabilities to deter Chinese expansion. The Indonesian and Malaysian militaries have dozens of naval and air bases near the southern section of China's nine-dash line whereas China is more than 1,000 km away from that area. In a war, Indonesia and Malaysia could bring the full force of their navy and air force to bear. China, by contrast, would not be able to sustain more than a dozen ships, submarines, and aircraft in the combat theater.

### **Philippine Achilles Heel**

Unfortunately, the Southeast Asian containment barrier breaks down on the east side, because the Philippines has failed to develop meaningful military power. While the rest of the region has responsibly acquired precision-guided munitions and

advanced platforms to fire them, the Philippines has spent its meager military budget on internal security.

Evidently, leaders in Manila believe that the US will bail them out if China parks its navy in their exclusive economic zone. The history of US relations with its allies, however, suggests that Washington would risk serious blood and treasure only if vital US interests were at stake. A Chinese Monroe Doctrine in East Asia would meet this standard. Chinese infringement on Philippine fishing rights would not.

Until the Philippines develops credible offensive strike capabilities, it should expect further Chinese encroachment near its shores. Other Southeast Asian nations have shown that China can be kept in check. Unfortunately, the country that won the legal battle against Chinese hegemony seems intent on losing the military struggle.

In sum, by harnessing their inherent geographic advantages and the precision-guided munitions revolution, the countries of Southeast Asia can compel China to accept the spirit, if not the law, of The Hague's ruling. Achieving this goal, however, will require sustained investment in modern military capabilities and the political will to use them.

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