

Deterrence & Security Assistance: The South China Sea

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ABSTRACT: This article identifies how the United States can apply security assistance to support regional security in the South China Sea in order to counter China's assertive expansion strategy.

As China continues to emerge as a global leader, its ambitions to redefine the global order and challenge existing geopolitical power dynamics will ensure that, whether or not President Donald Trump and his administration so choose, the focal point of US foreign policy will continue its migration east. And—given the complexities of the history, overlapping cultural and ideological claims, economic dimensions, and geography—the South China Sea is likely to be the proving ground that brings the Trump administration some of its most vexing, and consequential, foreign policy tests.

A successful approach to China must carefully balance national security, economic, cultural, and ethical policy priorities of the United States, which include but are not limited to those at stake in the South China Sea. Yet, there is no question a more assertive military and defense posture in the South China Sea is sorely needed, particularly as a complement to sustained diplomacy.

The Obama administration began dipping its toes in these fraught waters as part of its “Rebalance” strategy; the Trump administration has an opportunity to expand US military engagement in the region to generate far more consequential outcomes by strengthening regional coalitions and deterring China's frequent provocations. Key to a more effective regional military engagement will be a more sophisticated and robust approach to security assistance.

Regional Significance

While other challenges such as North Korea's nuclearization or the Islamic State's metastasis may pose a more immediate and direct threat to US security, the emergence of China—the world's most populous nation and second-largest economy—as a world power will be far more consequential for the long-term economic and security prospects of the United States. The critical question during this emergence is whether China will responsibly contribute to the existing international order or aggressively seek to subvert it. The South China Sea has emerged as the arena in which that question is most consistently and tangibly tested.

China's activities in the South China Sea can directly impact US interests in the region and serve as proxy for broader global concerns. These activities undermine the international order and the legal architecture, which serves as an organizing construct and stabilizing

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force in support of international trade, law enforcement, conflict resolution, and diplomacy. This strategy is by no means limited to the South China Sea, but it does reach its fullest expression there.

Territorial encroachments could enable China to impose conditions on economic activity in the South China Sea, through which over \$5 trillion in trade transits each year. We have already seen China press such advantages to enact economic punishments on its neighbors.¹ China's action to militarize contested features within the region extends their defensive perimeter several hundred miles beyond their borders, an enviable advantage in any potential military conflict. While US strategy should not be driven solely by military considerations, given the aggressive actions and rhetoric China has directed toward Japan, Taiwan, and other nations, ignoring such considerations would be foolish.

China's diplomatic, economic, and military actions in the South China Sea have a dual impact. They directly affect US interests in the region, and they serve as proxies for China's broader efforts to challenge and to undermine the accepted and stable international frameworks around the globe. Regardless of the strategic value to the United States *per se*, China's pursuits matter greatly to America's key allies and partners in the region. For that reason alone, China's actions in the South China Sea ought to be a priority for the United States, lest America risk further slippage in its regional standing as a great power, security guarantor, and valuable trading partner.

For allies in the region, such as Thailand and the Philippines, as well as key emerging partners, such as Indonesia and Vietnam, the South China Sea presents nearly existential crises. It is a place where the Chinese military and coast guard—as well as civilian “blue-hulled” paramilitary units in the Chinese maritime militia—harass the region's citizens, disrupt maritime economic activity, and press territorial claims they view with historic justification. For other key allies and partners outside the immediate region—such as Japan, Australia, and India—the region matters as a potential platform for Chinese aggression as well as the commercial risks of closed or constrained trade routes. If the United States is unable to exert leadership on the priority concerns voiced by these key regional actors, the actors' willingness to support American priorities will diminish.

China's encroachments are thus an assault on US leadership across Asia, succeeding in not only undermining America's relationships with key allies and partners but also turning these parties against each other. Recent moves by Vietnam and the Philippines to strengthen their bilateral ties with China, as well as renewed sparring between the two, indicate this pattern. As a result, America's global network of like-minded partners, which the recently released National Defense Strategy calls “crucial to our strategy, providing a durable, asymmetric strategic advantage that no competitor or rival can match,” is eroding.²

1 AFP, “China Blocked Exports of Rare Earth Metals to Japan, Traders Claim,” *Telegraph*, September 24, 2010.

2 US Department of Defense (DoD), *The National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: 2018* (Washington, DC: DoD, 2018).

Strategic Gaps

Successive administrations have sought to assert US leadership in Asia and to respond to China's destabilizing actions through a holistic set of policies that extend far beyond the security realm. Perhaps the most consequential long-term policies within the Asia-Pacific region are economic, and how the Trump administration positions the United States after withdrawing from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and maneuvers around China's ambitions for a regional trading arrangement will be a crucial determinant. Nimble diplomacy is also critical to a successful strategy. Broad and sustained efforts, such as seeking resolutions for the region's many territorial disputes, as well as narrower concern toward such pursuits as a constructive course with Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, offer important avenues for influencing regional actors.

Such initiatives, however, are not sufficient for the United States to remain a critical guarantor of security or the premier security partner in the region. Ultimately, a strong regional security coalition bound by common objectives and committed to common action is required to prevent Chinese coercion from dissolving the rules-based order that prevents an every-country-for-itself approach to territorial disputes, which could potentially end in broad military conflict. In the near term, therefore, America's security policy in the Asia-Pacific region must play a robust supporting role, even if it does not occupy center stage.

The Obama administration undertook a significant rebalance in the military realm, investing in a multifaceted approach to promote partnerships in the area, deter Chinese aggression, and maintain American leadership. These investments were weighted toward efforts largely too esoteric for, or invisible to, regional citizenries and even, to some degree, their governments. The Defense Department, for example, reshaped its long-term development and acquisition strategy, led by the Third Offset, to focus on high-end military capabilities that maintain US superiority over near-peer adversaries. This strategy also seeks to counter anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) strategies used by China and others. The US military has also focused on developing new operational concepts such as the Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons and other efforts of the Strategic Capabilities Office, often praised by Secretary of Defense Ashton B. Carter.

While critical to America's ability to win future wars, these efforts do little to visibly demonstrate America's presence or leadership in the region. Moreover, when states such as China rapidly change the political and geographical landscape by reclaiming features and taking other actions in the South China Sea, long-term, less visible military capabilities will arrive too late. Indeed, the mismatch between American and Chinese strategies has challenged the United States and its regional partners to manage the situation daily. As Dr. Ross Babbage notes in a recent report, "Beijing has employed a very sophisticated strategy and operational concept that could be implemented without challenging US alliance commitments or directly confronting U.S. or allied forces."³ His diagnosis is scathing:

3 Ross Babbage, *Countering China's Adventurism in the South China Sea: Strategy Options for the United States and Its Allies* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2017), 30.

Western governments have lacked a coherent strategy or game plan for achieving well-defined allied goals. Their actions in response to Beijing's assertive steps have almost always been reactive, involve very limited and highly predictable activities in domains determined by the Chinese, and could be readily ignored by Beijing. The result has been that the Western allies have passed the initiative and momentum to Beijing, ceded a large area of strategically important maritime territory, acquiesced to a flouting of international law, and repeatedly conveyed an impression of weak allied will, distraction, and disorganization.⁴

There will surely be disagreement about the degree of Babbage's criticism, but its overall message is hard to argue. What the United States has largely lacked is a strategy that, on one hand, provides a consistent and visible reminder of US commitment to the region that keeps the Chinese military off-balance while, on the other hand, avoids escalation by avoiding direct confrontation with China or impinging upon its key redlines. A more sophisticated strategy must include several elements that range from creative options for military operations to expanded information operations; particularly important is a more prominent and sophisticated approach to security assistance.

Security Assistance in Southeast Asia

During peacetime, combatant commanders have three primary tools to support visible regional engagement: posture, operations, and security cooperation. The Rebalance enhanced each of these tools to varying degrees. Posture and presence have been a main focus, with the major expansion and reconfiguration of US force deployments in the Asia-Pacific region. Freedom of Navigation operations and joint patrols by the United States and its partner navies, have also become a centerpiece of the US Pacific Command's (USPACOM's) presence in the region. Security cooperation, however, remains the most underdeveloped of these tools, and has tremendous potential for shaping the Asia-Pacific theater to achieve US objectives.

While most effective when used in concert with other tools, security cooperation maintains a range of benefits the other tools do not. First, only through security cooperation—including the sale of equipment, the provision of equipment and training, the enhancement of critical institutions, and the continual exchange of concepts and personnel—can the United States help partners measurably improve their military capabilities. Able partners can diminish risk to US forces and, at least partially, check China's ability to exploit other partners' weaknesses. Second, security cooperation is highly attractive because of the benefits it brings to partners, and is therefore one of the most effective tools for strengthening relationships and coalitions. Finally, and critically in the Asia-Pacific region where misunderstandings can quickly become flash points, security cooperation is generally far less provocative and risk inducing than tools such as the Freedom of Navigation operations. Security cooperation can work gradually and broadly to reshape the region's security environment without producing single points of confrontation.

Yet, despite these benefits, the security assistance resources in the region have been limited, and available resources have been applied in

4 Babbage, *Countering China's Adventurism*.

ways that largely failed to produce tangible advances toward US strategic priorities. Looking upon the South China Sea, and its associated policy challenges, with a fresh perspective, the new administration will find a tremendous opportunity to apply security cooperation in the region more effectively for near-term gains.

Current Assessment

Security assistance in Europe and the Middle East spiked in the last fifteen years as a result of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001; wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; Russia's resurgent aggression; and the constantly shifting landscape of extremism and insurgency in the Middle East. Meanwhile, the Rebalance notwithstanding, the region's meager allotment of assistance resources has hardly changed.

The entire Asia-Pacific region, for example, generally receives about one percent of the budget for Foreign Military Financing (FMF), the State Department's flagship security assistance program.⁵ In Fiscal Year 2015, the Southeast Asian countries that border the South China Sea received \$74.75 million from the program: the Philippines received \$50 million, while Indonesia and Vietnam received the remaining allocation.⁶ On one hand, this amount represents a doubling of the region's 2011 funding of \$36.2 million.⁷ On the other hand, the total equates to the program's administrative costs.

Seeking to implement the Obama administration's Rebalance strategy, the State Department announced a few new regional investments, including more FMF funding for Southeast Asian nations and a \$25 million Southeast Asia Maritime Law Enforcement Initiative. Moreover, late in Obama's administration, Carter launched the Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative (MSI), to remedy the neglect and aimlessness that had characterized regional security assistance, and to foster more visible engagement in the region. Promoted as a 5-year, \$425 million effort, MSI significantly increased US investments in the region and more than doubled the annual Foreign Military Financing program with the five primary partner nations of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam.⁸ This investment is important, particularly as an indication of the Defense Department's increased commitment to the region. But even after these new investments, the entire region still receives less security assistance funding than it did when the Rebalance began.⁹

While funding totals are an important measure of security assistance, their impact in the region should not only be measured by monetary value but also by their impact on partners' military capabilities, the strength of bilateral and multilateral relationships, and the deterrence

5 Eddie Linczer, "The Role of Security Assistance in Washington's Pivot to Southeast Asia," American Enterprise Institute (AEI), August 26, 2016, <https://www.aei.org/publication/the-role-of-security-assistance-in-washingtons-pivot-to-southeast-asia/>.

6 US Department of State (DoS), *Congressional Budget Justification: Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs: Fiscal Year 2017* (Washington, DC: DoS, 2016).

7 "Foreign Military Financing Account Summary," US Department of State, January 20, 2017, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/pm/ppa/sat/c14560.htm>.

8 Linczer 2016. According to the AEI report, FMF expenditures for the five nations total \$76 million per year; MSI will add an average of \$85 million per year to that sum.

9 Council on Foreign Relations, "America's Pivot to Asia Actually Led to Drop in Security Assistance for Southeast Asia," *Huffington Post*, July 7, 2017.

of provocative behavior. In other words, security assistance should be measured by how successfully it advances US national security strategy. On that scale, America's assistance in the region also has a mixed record.

Certainly there have been individual success stories. Counterterrorism assistance to the Filipino military's long campaign against the Abu Sayyaf Group in Mindanao is generally regarded as having transformed Filipino special operations forces and delivered a strategic victory against the militants. The National Coast Watch Center in Manila has provided the Philippines with a potential platform to expand its maritime domain awareness efforts across multiple government agencies. And Defense Institution Reform Initiative efforts to support the Indonesian Ministry of Defense as it enhances its defense strategy and planning processes have made important strides.

Despite these success stories, there is little to suggest any overall strategic direction. Modest assistance budgets have been divided across a broad range of programs, each with a different objective. Administration budget justification materials and other data indicate counterterrorism, counternarcotics, counterproliferation, military professionalization, and maritime law enforcement have all been priorities funded through dozens of different programs and implementers.¹⁰ This approach thinly distributed funds while risking redundant or contradictory programming. Moreover, that such investments have rarely focused directly on the emergent key security challenges in the region of Southeast Asia, stability and free commerce in the South China Sea, creates a sense of strategic aimlessness.

A New Strategy

Neglect and aimlessness will not deliver the strategic outcomes our security interests in the region demand. A new approach is needed. While the amount of resources devoted to the effort is important, the most critical factor is ultimately the strategy driving security cooperation in the region. America's military engagements with, and assistance to, partners in Southeast Asia must be driven by a coherent medium- to long-term strategy that understands and accounts for objectives, motivations, and vulnerabilities of China and partner nations. Like other military preparations, such planning must address scenarios based on potential reactions by regional stakeholders or other developments. Such planning must also include thoughtful approaches to strategic communications with partners that are not always strategically aligned with US objectives as well as stakeholders, like China, that may misunderstand America's intentions.

The building blocks for such an approach exist in the form of collaborative programs such as MSI, extensive analysis of regional stakeholders and security challenges, growing interest among partners in achieving a just and stable regional order, and bipartisan, interagency commitment to the effort. A handful of practical, feasible steps could

¹⁰ See, DoS, *Congressional Budget Justification: Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs, Fiscal Year 2018* (Washington, DC: DoS, 2017); DoD, *FY 2016 Section 1211(a) Report to Congress on DoD Assistance to Foreign Security Forces* (Washington, DC: DoD, 2016); and additional assistance data available at www.ForeignAssistance.gov.

transform US engagement in the region and dramatically improve the return on our security assistance investments.

Strategic Security Assistance

First, security assistance must be reoriented to focus far more sharply on specific, strategic results. The United States should endeavor to deliver capabilities to partners, especially those that might complicate or replicate China's A2/AD capabilities that could be reasonably employed during a regional contingency. This focus cannot, as it has previously, prioritize delivering hardware and neglect developing institutional capabilities, such as personnel management and logistics systems, that are vital to successfully employing such hardware. America's assistance must be planned to deliver truly viable capabilities rather than just showpiece equipment. Surely our potential adversaries can discern the difference.

Such assistance should be informed by careful analysis of potential contingencies, including possible US military responses, to identify realistic roles for partners' militaries. Partner nations bordering the South China Sea region are in most cases smaller, less sophisticated, and often oriented toward a narrower range of missions. These partners may not be capable of defeating China in a direct conflict, but they can contribute meaningfully to contingency operations. A regional network of interoperable capabilities can form the basis of an effective military coalition. Moreover, specific capabilities can complicate an adversary's war plans by denying or challenging access, enabling other actors (like the United States) through logistics and intelligence support, defending key infrastructure, and delaying enemy advances until help can arrive. If improved partner capabilities accomplish one or more of these objectives, the chances of a successful US or coalition contingency operation increase substantially and risk to US forces diminishes. Capabilities that can expand the range of America's options for overcoming China's A2/AD capabilities would have a significant impact, and assistance efforts should be targeted there.

In addition, Pacific Command stands to realize significant strategic gains by more carefully considering the timing and messaging that accompanies assistance, particularly in relation to provocative actions by China. Take, for example, the construction of airfield infrastructure for a partner air force, which might be used by US fighters in a contingency. Such assistance addresses logistics requirements vital for successful contingency operations, which is beneficial to the partner and the United States. How much more of a strategic impact would the construction of an airfield have, though, if it were framed as a direct response to, and initiated within weeks of, the groundbreaking of Chinese reclamation activities on a contested feature of the South China Sea? Timing, a variable US assistance efforts have largely ignored, is critical.

Relevant Capacity-Building

During a contingency, China's worst nightmare might not be the full and unbridled firepower of the American military but an interoperable and effective coalition of American and regional militaries, seamlessly integrating their infrastructure and capabilities into synchronized action. The demonstration of such coordination and interoperability during peacetime, therefore, should serve as a powerful deterrent against

potential Chinese provocations. Yet the truth is, our partners in Southeast Asia are not interoperable—not with the United States, not with each other—nor are they currently capable of effective coalition action.

Pacific Command should increase its focus on the intersection of security assistance and real-world operations, building regional capacity for coalition warfare and exercising key capabilities and operational concepts. In practice, such an effort would not simply entail more or larger multilateral exercises but creative approaches to engagements that generate more frequent and more robust bilateral and multilateral operations in the South China Sea and in other key maritime regions.

For instance, joint patrols, either by the United States and one or more partners or by multiple partners without the United States, develop interoperability and habits of collaboration while enhancing maritime domain awareness and law enforcement in areas of mutual interest. Recently, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines agreed to conduct such coordinated patrols in the Sulu Sea, which is an area abutting the South China Sea that has seen significant threats from pirate and militant groups.¹¹ The United States has a substantial interest in fostering this collaboration and could provide direct assistance to the mission, particularly in the form of intelligence or logistics support. Coast guards and navies from each partner may also need assistance deepening interoperability and extending time at sea. Targeting security assistance toward this mission would create an immediate impact, while building the foundation for future multilateral collaboration.

America would also benefit by working with regional partners to develop multilateral frameworks that institutionalize regional collaboration. Successful examples of this approach abound in the context of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, where members have increasingly pooled limited resources to achieve shared capabilities. The Movement Coordination Center Europe (MCCE), for instance, helps partners coordinate strategic lift assets to maximize efficiency and cost savings. In concrete terms, the coordination allows one nation to ship supplies on the plane or vessel of another member nation if there is available space.¹² Other examples range from the Alliance Ground Surveillance system—a similar consortium pooling intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets—to combining the resources of multiple member nations to purchase US weapons technologies.

These models offer a compelling path for Southeast Asian nations to tackle shared challenges in a cost-efficient manner while reducing operating costs and providing a platform for deepening interoperability and trust. Given the immense logistical challenges associated with responding to events, such as humanitarian disasters or terrorist attacks, across thousands of islands and thousands of miles, developing a shared logistics initiative along the lines of MCCE should take top priority.

Finally, exercises should play an important role but repeating the same annual exercises with no apparent strategic rationale is unlikely to pay strategic dividends. As much as broad-based exercises such as the Rim

¹¹ Arlina Arshad, “Jakarta, KL and Manila To Start Joint Patrols in Sulu Sea,” *Straits Times* (Singapore), August 5, 2016.

¹² “Welcome,” Movement Coordination Centre Europe, January 16, 2018, <http://mce-mil.com>.

of the Pacific and Cobra Gold can contribute to building relationships, more targeted exercises offer greater operational value. These exercises offer an important platform to develop and test operational concepts and should thus be framed according to specific assumptions about coalition participants and scenarios. Exercises also often bring opportunities to develop necessary infrastructure and deepen knowledge about key areas of operation. Furthermore, such exercises offer an opportunity to demonstrate new capabilities in the region. While the US military has rarely taken such an approach, it certainly deserves a place in the commander's playbook as a tool for deterrence or strategic messaging.

Provocation Planning

A playbook containing a range of realistic options for responding to potential scenarios is becoming increasingly important for Admiral Harry B. Harris Jr., the commander of US Pacific Command. As China's provocations become increasingly frequent and aggressive, Harris and his leadership at the Defense Department and in the White House need a robust set of options to allow the United States to respond in ways that uphold the international rule of law, reassure allies and partners of US resolve, and deter future provocations. While this playbook should include a diverse range of tools, there is great and unrealized potential for refining tools that involve assistance to and collaboration with partners. Such engagement-focused tools are often, though not always, less escalatory and, given the common resolve they demonstrate, may have more impact.

A variety of such options drawing on the concepts articulated above should be further developed to expand the commander's playbook. Joint patrols are one such option discussed repeatedly at USPACOM headquarters, and some steps have been taken to expand such efforts.¹³ However, sufficient partner capability and interoperability necessary for joint patrols often lags well behind ambitions. Rather than continuing to discuss joint patrols as a hypothetical possibility, Pacific Command should accelerate efforts to prepare partners for participating in such patrols. In addition to providing important elements of required assistance such as patrol boats and equipment—particularly interoperable communications equipment—US assistance must also emphasize operator and unit training, logistics and maintenance support, and bilateral exercises that put operating concepts into practice.

Joint patrols require commencing capacity-building activities now to ensure partners will be capable of participating in such patrols when desired in the future. Other tools could be available without such capacity-building; however, the United States should undertake additional planning and analysis to ensure such resources can be employed in an effective and timely manner. Building upon the previous example, the Seabees or other military engineering units could easily construct an airfield or a small port facility, but the impact of such action

13 Harry B. Harris Jr., "Department of Defense Press Briefing by Adm. Harris in the Pentagon Briefing Room," US Pacific Command, February 25, 2016, <http://www.pacom.mil/Media/Speeches-Testimony/Article/673521/departement-of-defense-press-briefing-by-adm-harris-in-the-pentagon-briefing-room/>; HQ Pacific Air Forces Public Affairs, "PACAF Airmen Stand up Air Contingent in Philippines," US Pacific Command, April 18, 2016, <http://www.pacom.mil/Media/Article/723604/pacaf-airmen-stand-up-air-contingent-in-philippines/>; and David B. Larter, "Carrier Group Returns to South China Sea Amid Tensions," *Navy Times*, April 14, 2016.

would increase dramatically if undertaken in direct response to China militarizing a contested feature.

Executing such an activity requires planning now by identifying preferred locations, securing permissions from partner nations, and developing concrete concepts of operations for executing and messaging the activity. Another powerful option for the playbook might be conducting a “snap” exercise, in which US forces carry out an unscheduled training demonstration with little warning. Given the provocative nature of snap exercises, they, too, require careful planning. Still, as China’s activities become more aggressive, the commander’s playbook must be filled with a spectrum of fully developed, executable options to match a variety of scenarios.

Army Involvement

Admittedly, the new approaches discussed heretofore are not easy, and they are made all the more challenging by the need for partners to commit, with the United States, to these courses of action. A shared sense of commitment cannot be taken for granted among a group of diverse nations who each has a history of uneasy relations with the United States. However, what is clearly a challenge can too easily become an excuse. Partnerships are forged through consistent engagement and through exploration of mutual interests and benefit. Many Southeast Asian partners would likely argue that the United States has too often sought to leverage regional nations to advance US interests without fully considering the strategic objectives and priorities of the nations themselves. To overcome relationship challenges, the US should work to identify priorities shared by partners, avoiding a mismatch between US and partner commitments.

Whether intentional or not, Pacific Command’s engagement in the region has often represented such a mismatch. With a focus on the maritime arena, US Navy and Marine Corps forces, along with their regional counterparts, have inadvertently become the dominant players in the region. Pacific Command has also prioritized engagement between US and partner air forces. Left out, particularly in maritime security engagements and assistance, have been the region’s armies, despite the fact that the army is the dominant military service in each of the primary regional partners.

Meanwhile, there is a growing recognition that the Army’s role in confronting Chinese provocations and responding to a contingency must expand. In fact, Harris has commented, “I think the army should be in the business of sinking ships with land-based surface-to-ship missile systems . . . What the Army brings traditionally is what they always bring, which is mass and firepower and capability.”¹⁴ Yet, as the Army works to expand its role in the region, there has been little recognition that these same capabilities—mass and firepower based ashore but aimed at the sea—could be contributed by partner armies in the region as easily as by the Army itself. Ideally, a warfighting coalition would demonstrate the same interoperability and scope of partner contributions in the armies’ domain as demonstrated by the other services.

¹⁴ Franz-Stefan Gady, “US Admiral: US Army Needs to Create Ship-Killing Units for South China Sea,” *Diplomat*, November 17, 2016.

Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr., in his *Foreign Affairs* article “How to Deter China,” detailed a concept for establishing coastal defenses around the South China Sea that notably recognizes the role partners might play.¹⁵ While Krepinevich’s specific vision has its opponents, it points the way to an assistance initiative with partners that would be attractive to their army-dominated militaries and, as Krepinevich notes, align with investments many partners have already signaled they intend to make. Krepinevich even identifies specific systems, such as coastal radars, short-range interceptor missiles, and short-range, precision-guided rockets and mortars. Likewise, Harris named high mobility artillery rocket systems and Paladin howitzers as two systems US forces might deploy to the region, and there is no reason they should not be considered for transfer to foreign partners. One of the key benefits of expanding engagement with regional armies in support of a coastal defense mission is that many of these systems are in relatively wide circulation globally and thus can feasibly be shared without the significant technology security hurdles that complicate many foreign weapons transfers.

In addition to building coastal defense capacity, the Army can play a leading role in executing each of the concepts discussed above. Already, the Army’s innovative Pacific Pathways program has proven to be an effective tool for rotating Army units through the region. The Army should consider how that program and other regular exercises might be used for more strategic purposes, such as training partners in coastal defense operations or demonstrating new operational capabilities. Additional potential resides in reorienting the Army National Guard’s State Partnership Programs in the region to undertake more operationally relevant activities, such as joint intelligence collection missions or amphibious warfare trainings, with their host counterparts.

Military Diplomacy

Forging the depth of partnership required to support a more sophisticated US regional strategy will require substantially enhancing military diplomacy in the region in addition to increasing the focus on regional armies. Under Carter’s leadership as the Secretary of Defense, the Defense Department took several important steps in this direction, notably through Carter personally and persistently engaging in forums like the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM-Plus) and the Shangri-La Dialogue. Secretary of Defense James Mattis began his tenure by traveling to the Asia-Pacific region, signaling he understands the importance of continuing these partnerships. Continued, and additional, engagement at all levels will be important to nurturing such relationships throughout the region.

Additionally, Pacific Command should look for opportunities to elevate the level of bilateral staff talks, not only to signal the importance of each partner in the region but also to help break through the respective bureaucracies to secure commitments for new initiatives. Annual naval staff talks, for example, are held by the US Seventh Fleet and include key partners from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore. Elevating these talks from the Seventh Fleet to the Pacific Fleet—in essence, elevating the partnership from the three-star to the four-star

¹⁵ Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr., “How to Deter China,” *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 3 (March/April 2015), 78–86.

level—could pay significant dividends in terms of partners’ perceptions and US access to key leaders. Each service’s approach to bilateral staff talks across the region varies, but all include opportunities to expand and to elevate these engagements with key partners.

As China continues to escalate provocative behavior in the region, a robust playbook representing options that are feasible and cover a spectrum of scale, risk, and method will be essential for the commander of USPACOM, the secretary of defense, and the president. The strategic approach presented above provides a series of related and mutually reinforcing concepts rather than a selection of limited choices to fill out that playbook.

To summarize, a more sophisticated approach to security cooperation in the region brings four valuable benefits: low cost, international engagement, limited risk of escalation, and expansion of military options. Partnerships that distribute contributions to regional security cost the US less than other strategies. Empowering other nations in the region to participate in their security engages them in forging regional solutions that align with their strategic objectives and priorities and strengthen regional security architectures. Such solutions also allow the United States to act decisively without haphazardly escalating tensions. Finally, well-targeted capacity-building investments will create additional military options for the US and partners in future scenarios, improving America’s strategic position. The approach detailed here is only one part—and indeed not the most important part—of a broader strategy required not only for the region but also to address global concerns about China’s assertiveness. Yet, if the United States fails to adopt a more strategic approach to engagements with regional partners and allies, it will be ceding key ground to a China that is clearly asserting its ambitions in the region and beyond.