

The Military–Strategic Situation in and around the South China Sea

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The nations surrounding the South China Sea (SCS) now constitute a leading consumer of arms, and increasingly some of the most modern and most advanced armaments are finding their way into the inventories of Asian militaries. As a result, many Asian-Pacific militaries have experienced a significant, if not unprecedented, build-up over the past several years, in terms of quantity and quality. This arms-acquisition process has been impelled by a number of strategic and economic factors. The drive for great power status, whether regionally or globally, has pushed many countries in the area to strengthen their militaries. These developments have, in turn, sparked competition in arming and counter-arming – even drawing in those countries that seek only to acquire improved defences against increasingly assertive, well-armed neighbours. Regional great-power machinations have been further complicated by the United States’ renewed interest in the Asia-Pacific, as evidenced by Washington’s “pivot to Asia” and its subsequent growing military presence. At the same time, rising regional defence budgets, driven by growing economies, together with a buyer’s market in the global arms marketplace offering almost every type of advanced weaponry, have made it possible for most nations in the Asia-Pacific to acquire modern armaments. This combination of strategic competition, rising regional wealth, and the growing availability of advanced conventional weaponry has created a “harmonic convergence” underwriting one of the most far-reaching arms build-ups in the world.

The Political-Military Context behind Regional Military Modernisation

The nations surrounding the South China Sea have many reasons for acquiring new defence hardware and improving national military capabilities. The region is clearly one of constantly shifting security dynamics, with rising great powers, new threats and security challenges (missile attacks, terrorism, the proliferation of WMD systems, international crime, and the like), ongoing territorial disputes, and new military commitments (such as disaster relief, humanitarian assistance, and contingency and stabilisation operations) that require new capabilities for power projection, mobility, firepower, intelligence and surveillance, and joint operations. All of these factors, in one way or another, are affecting regional military modernisation activities.

China, in particular, possesses great power aspirations that drive much of its requirements for a modern military, particularly when it comes to projecting sustained power beyond its border, delivering firepower, and dominating information battlespace. Beijing, for example, seeks to gain hard power commensurate with its growing soft

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power (i.e., economic, diplomatic, and cultural).² These goals are clearly apparent in China's increasingly assertive, even belligerent, behaviour in the South China Sea.³ Beijing is actively engaged in significantly militarising the SCS, including aggressive patrolling by naval and para-naval forces; the dramatic expansion of military defences (e.g., long-range surface-to-air missiles) on Woody Island, China's largest possession in the South China Sea; and, in particular, an ambitious artificial island-building program that has taken place in the Spratlys over the last few years, including construction of runways on at least three reefs, emplacement of radar stations, and even the temporary movement of weapons to these islands.⁴

At the same time, China is keen to build expeditionary forces capable of projecting power out to the "second island chain," which is delineated by Guam, Indonesia, and Australia. Eventually, it hopes to be able to project sustainable force throughout the whole of the Western Pacific and into the Indian Ocean.⁵ In particular, this goal has led Beijing to deemphasise ground forces in favour of building up the naval, air, and missile forces of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). According to its 2015 white paper, the PLA will continue to de-emphasise land operations, all but abandoning People's War (except in name and in terms of political propaganda), particularly in favour of seapower and force projection: "The traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned, and great importance has to be attached to managing the seas and oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests."⁶ As a result, the PLA Navy (PLAN) "will gradually shift its focus from 'offshore waters defence' to the combination of 'offshore waters defence' with 'open seas protection,'"⁷ an evolutionary development from what was announced in the 2006 white paper, which proclaimed that the "Navy aims at gradual extension of the strategic depth for offshore defensive operations."⁸ This will require a "combined, multi-functional and efficient marine combat force structure. The PLAN will enhance its capabilities for strategic deterrence and counterattack, maritime maneuvers, joint operations at sea, comprehensive defense and comprehensive support."⁹

China's military rise has helped to spark Sino-American competition in the far western Pacific Ocean, and particularly in the South China Sea. At the beginning of 2012, the Obama administration formally promulgated its new "pivot," or rebalancing, back to the

² Ben Vogel, "China Embarks on 15-Year Armed Forces Modernization Program," *Jane's Defense Weekly*, July 1, 2006.

³ "Ambassador: China has indisputable sovereignty over S. China Sea islands," *Xinhua*, January 23, 2013.

⁴ Ian Storey, "The South China Sea Dispute" (parts 1 and 2), *China Brief*, June 7, 2013, and June 21, 2013; Malcolm Cook, "The Region's Seas as Arena for Great Power Contest," *Straits Times*, August 11, 2015.

⁵ Timothy R. Heath, *Developments in China's Military Force Projection and Expeditionary Capabilities*, testimony presented before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission on January 21, 2016 (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, January 2016).

⁶ "Section IV: Building and Development of China's Armed Forces," *China's Military Strategy* (Beijing: The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, May 2015); Dennis J. Blasko, "The 2015 Chinese Defense White Paper on Strategy in Perspective: Maritime Missions Require a Change in the PLA Mindset," *China Brief*, May 29, 2015.

⁷ "Section IV: Building and Development of China's Armed Forces," *China's Military Strategy*.

⁸ "Section II: National Defense Policy," *China's National Defense in 2006* (Beijing: Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, December 29, 2006).

⁹ Anthony H. Cordesman and Steven Colley, *Chinese Strategy and Military Modernization in 2015: A Comparative Analysis* (Final Review Draft) (Washington DC: Center for International and Strategic Studies, October 10, 2015), p. 41.

Asia-Pacific region. The pivot indicates a consequential realignment of US global power, emphasising air- and sea-based operations in an “arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia.” In particular, this rebalancing involves the redeployment of US forces from other parts of the world. The US Navy (USN) plans to position 60 per cent of its fleet in the Pacific Ocean, compared to a current 50/50 division between the Pacific and the Atlantic Oceans. In addition, 2,500 US Marines are to be based in Darwin, Australia, while Singapore has agreed to host up to four of the new USN Littoral Combat Ships. Finally, the United States has expanded its access to ports and other facilities in the Philippines and Vietnam.¹⁰

As part of the pivot, in late 2009 the US Navy and Air Force have undertaken to develop a new joint operational concept, initially dubbed AirSea Battle (ASB), later redesignated the “Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons” (JAM-GC). ASB/JAM-GC is intended to preserve stability and to sustain US power projection and freedom of action, and to offset current and anticipated asymmetric threats through a novel integration of US Air Force and Navy’s concepts, assets, and capabilities. ASB/JAM-GC appears to be specifically designed to counterbalance Beijing’s growing strength and influence in the region, especially given China’s increasing capacity for anti-access/area denial (A2/AD).¹¹

In Southeast Asia there is growing unease over China’s “creeping assertiveness” in the SCS and its growing military presence in the region.¹² Additionally, Southeast Asian countries face new unconventional threats, particularly piracy, terrorism, international crime, and human trafficking. At the same time, many Southeast Asian states are often as suspicious of one-another as they are of external powers such as China, with historical animosities continuing between Malaysia and Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, and Thailand and Burma, to name but a few. Moreover, competing claims over EEZs in the SCS and over the Spratly Islands are just as strong between the various Southeast Asian nations as they are between these nations and Beijing. Consequently, these tensions have been powerful motivators behind recent national military build-ups in the region, especially when it comes to acquiring capabilities – particularly long-range naval and air forces – for patrolling and protecting EEZs and promoting sovereignty rights.¹³

Regional Military Modernisation Activities

Certainly most Asia-Pacific militaries in the 21st century are a vast improvement over their predecessors of 20 or even 15 years ago, given the addition of fourth-generation-plus combat aircraft, new classes of warships and submarines, precision-strike weapons, and so on (see Table 1 for further details). In China, for example, modern J-10

¹⁰ Kurt Campbell and Brian Andrews, *Explaining the U.S. “Pivot” to Asia* (London: Chatham House, August 2013).

¹¹ Andrew F. Krepinevich, *Why AirSea Battle?* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2010); Greg Jaffe, “US model for future war fans tensions with China and inside Pentagon,” *Washington Post*, August 2, 2012 (http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-model-for-a-future-war-fans-tensions-with-china-and-inside-pentagon/2012/08/01/gJQAC6F8PX_print.html).

¹² See Ian Storey, “China’s ‘Charm Offensive’ Loses Momentum in Southeast Asia” (parts 1 and 2), *China Brief*, April 29, 2010, and May 13, 2010.

¹³ Richard A. Bitzinger, “A New Arms Race? Explaining Recent Southeast Asian Military Acquisitions,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (2010), pp. 59-62; Andrew Tan, *Force Modernization Trends in Southeast Asia*, Institute of Defense and Strategic Studies, 2004, pp. 30–31.

and Su-30 fighters have replaced aging MiG-19s and MiG-21s. Likewise, India is supplementing vintage Jaguars, MiG-27s, and Mirage-2000s with Su-30s and the *Tejas* LCA. In Southeast Asia, F-15s are replacing F-5s and A-4s in the Singapore Air Force; Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam are acquiring advanced Su-30 aircraft, and Thailand has bought a fleet of Swedish *Gripens*. In addition, Japan and South Korea have both signed contracts to acquire the F-35 fifth-generation fighter, and Singapore and perhaps India are also potential customers of the JSF. Just as important, beyond-visual-range, active radar-guided air-to-air missiles (AAM), such as the AMRAAM and AA-12, are replacing or supplementing older generation AAMS, such as the short-range AIM-9 Sidewinder or the semi-active AIM-7 Sparrow.

In terms of naval vessels, countries such as China, India, Japan, and Singapore are acquiring advanced destroyers and frigates outfitted with sophisticated radars, surface-to-air missiles, and combat systems that provide their militaries with long-range air defence at sea – and even missile defence – capabilities that they did not earlier possess. Moreover, since the turn of the century, countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and Vietnam have begun to equip their navies with modern submarines – in some cases acquiring submarines for the first time. In the case of China, Japan, India, and Singapore, these submarines are outfitted with air-independent propulsion that permits them to remain submerged for much longer periods of time. China and India, for their part, have highly ambitious nuclear-powered submarine programs (both SSN and SSBN). Finally, there has been a steady increase of other types of naval vessels to regional navies, including amphibious assault ships, armed corvettes, and missile patrol boats, and even an aircraft carrier (China's *Liaoning*, the PLAN's first – but most certainly not last – fixed-wing carrier).

Finally, many Asia-Pacific militaries are being equipped for the first time with a variety of stand-off precision-strike weapons, including JDAM (Japan and Singapore), JSOW (Singapore), and the RBS-15 air-to-surface missile (Thailand). Just as importantly, China and Taiwan have developed their own land-attack cruise missiles, while China and India have gained new capabilities for using ballistic missiles as battlefield strike weapons. In addition, these forces are certainly better equipped than in the past, with systems for communications, command and control, intelligence, and surveillance. For example, China, India, Japan, and Singapore have all acquired airborne early-warning and command aircraft, while UAVs have proliferated throughout the region.

Impact and Implications of New Capabilities

The arms build-up around the South China Sea over the past 15 to 20 years has been undeniably significant. In the first place, recent acquisitions by regional militaries – especially navies and air forces – constitute something more than mere modernisation; rather, the new types of armaments being procured and deployed promise to significantly affect regional combat capabilities. Local militaries are acquiring greater lethality and accuracy at longer ranges, while the wide deployment of stand-off precision-guided weapons – such as anti-ship cruise missiles, land-attack cruise missiles, tactical ballistic missiles, and a variety of smart munitions, some carried by fourth-generation-plus fighter aircraft – have greatly increased these militaries' firepower and effectiveness, making them capable of longer distance and more precise attack. Additionally, militaries in the SCS region are acquiring new or increased capabilities for force projection, operational maneuvers, and speed. Modern submarines

and surface combatants, amphibious assault ships, aircraft carriers, air-to-air refuelling abilities, and transport aircraft have all extended these militaries' potential range of action. SCS-contiguous militaries are also more capable of survival, due to the increased use of stealth and active defences, particularly missile defence. Finally, these forces are improving their capabilities for battlefield knowledge, situational awareness, and command and control. New platforms for reconnaissance and surveillance, especially in the air and in space, have considerably expanded these militaries' capacities to look out over the horizon and across all five areas of the future battlespace: ground, sea, air, space, and the electromagnetic spectrum.

In addition, some regional militaries are acquiring the types of military equipment that could fundamentally transform their forces. In particular, the embrace of network-enabled warfare – known in China as “winning wars under conditions of informationization,”¹⁴ and in Singapore as the Integrated Knowledge Command and Control Concept (IKC2) – is a potentially historic shift. Regional militaries could be on the cusp of bundling together sensors, computers, communications, command and control systems, munitions, and platforms that would greatly improve the synergy of their fighting effectiveness. Such emerging capabilities, particularly on the part of China, could in turn greatly affect strategy and operations in future military endeavors in the Asia-Pacific.

That the Asia-Pacific nations have added considerably to their military arsenals is not in doubt. Nor does the process of military modernisation – propelled by regional geopolitical forces, enabled by robust defence spending and a buyer's market in international arms, and stirred by the transformative promise of network-centric warfare – seem to show any signs of abating. Consequently, countries in the region are acquiring hardware that, on the surface at least, imbues their militaries with new capacities for combat when it comes to mobility, speed, precision strike, firepower, battlespace intelligence, and cyber-attack. The combination of all these developments could be interpreted as pointing to a disturbing trend in the regional security calculus. At the very least, countries around the South China Sea are adding new capabilities for combat, and any conflict in the region, should it occur, is likely to be faster, more intense, and more lethal than past conflicts, and therefore perhaps more devastating in its effects. How these increased capacities may affect tensions in the region is still uncertain, but almost certainly they promise to magnify any military clashes in the South China Sea, should they occur.

¹⁴ See “Section III: Revolution in Military Affairs with Chinese Characteristics,” *China's National Defense in 2004* (Beijing: *Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China*, 2004); You Ji, “China's Emerging National Defense Strategy,” *China Brief*, November 24, 2004.

Table 1

Recent and Planned Major Asian-Pacific Arms Acquisitions

Country	Surface Combatants	Amphibious Ships/Aircraft Carriers	Submarines	Combat Aircraft	Missiles & Other Systems
China	<p>22+ Type-051C/-052B/-052C/-052D destroyers</p> <p>4 Russian-built <i>Sovremenny</i>-class destroyers</p> <p>26+ Type-054/-054A frigates</p> <p>60+ <i>Houbei</i>-class FAC(M)</p>	<p>1 <i>Liaoning</i>-class (ex-<i>Varyag</i>)</p> <p>Will likely build indigenous a/c carriers</p> <p>4+ Type-071 LPDs</p> <p>LHD-class vessel reportedly under construction</p>	<p>26+ <i>Song</i>-/<i>Yuan</i>-class submarines (some w/AIP)</p> <p>12 Russian-built <i>Kilo</i>-class submarines</p> <p>4+ Type-093 SSN</p> <p>4 Type-094 SSBN</p>	<p>~300 Su-27/-30 fighters (some Su-27s locally produced)</p> <p>Building 400+ J-10 fighters</p> <p>J-31/J-35 5th-generation fighters under development</p>	<p>AAM: R-77, PL-12</p> <p>ASCM: 3M-54E/E1 Sunburn, 3M-80E <i>Moskit</i>, YJ-83</p> <p>LACM: DH-10</p> <p>SSMs: DF-11/-15</p>
India	<p>3 <i>Kolkata</i>-class destroyers</p> <p>Building 4 <i>Visakhapatnam</i> - class destroyers</p> <p>Plans to build 7 Project-17A-class frigates</p>	<p>Acquiring ex-Russian <i>Kiev</i>-class STOVL aircraft carrier, to be modified to fly MiG-29 fighters</p> <p>Building Indigenous Aircraft Carrier, INS <i>Vikrant</i>, to fly MiG-29 or <i>Tejas</i> fighters</p>	<p>Acquiring 6+ French-designed <i>Scorpène</i>-class submarines; later submarines AIP-equipped</p> <p>3 <i>Arihant</i>-class nuclear-powered submarines under construction</p>	<p>Acquiring 240+ Su-30MKI fighters (some locally produced)</p> <p>36 <i>Rafale</i> fighters</p> <p>Building up to 260 locally developed <i>Tejas</i> fighters</p>	<p>AAM: R-77</p> <p>ASCM: Exocet, <i>Brahmos</i></p> <p>SSMs: Prithvi, Agni</p>
Indonesia	<p>Acquiring 2+ Sigma-class frigates</p> <p>4 Dutch-built Sigma-class corvettes</p>	<p>Acquiring 4 Korean-made LDPs</p>	<p>3 Korean-built Type-209 submarines</p>	<p>16 Su-27/-30 fighters</p> <p>24 ex-USAF F-16s</p>	<p>AAM: R-77</p> <p>ASCM: YJ-83</p>

Country	Surface Combatants	Amphibious Ships/Aircraft Carriers	Submarines	Combat Aircraft	Missiles & Other Systems
Japan	<p>4 <i>Akizuki</i>-class destroyers</p> <p>6 <i>Kongo</i>- and <i>Atago</i>-class destroyers, equipped with upgraded <i>Aegis</i> combat system and SM-3 missile for MD</p>	<p>3 <i>Osumi</i>-class LPDs</p> <p>2 <i>Hyuga</i>-class DDH (14,000 ton); could be upgraded to LHD</p> <p>2 <i>Izumo</i>-class (19,500-ton) DDH under construction (fixed-wing capable?)</p>	<p>Building 22 <i>Soryu</i>-class submarines (w/AIP)</p>	<p>94 F-2 fighter jets</p> <p>42 F-35 JSF on order</p> <p>Indigenous 5th-gen fighter under development</p>	<p>AAM: AMRAAM, AAM-5</p> <p>ASCM: Harpoon</p> <p>AGM: JDAM</p>
Malaysia	<p>2 British-built <i>Lekiu</i>-class frigates</p> <p>6 German-designed, locally built MEKO A100 OPVs</p> <p>Acquiring 6+ French <i>Gowind</i>-class corvettes</p>		<p>2 French-built <i>Scorpène</i>-class submarines</p>	<p>18 Su-30MKM fighters</p> <p>Plans to acquire 18 additional fighters, type undecided</p>	<p>AAMs: R-77</p> <p>ASCM: <i>Excoet</i></p> <p>MRL: ASTROS-II</p>
Singapore	<p>6 French-designed <i>Formidable</i>-class "stealth" frigates</p> <p>8 1200-ton littoral combat ships under construction</p>	<p>4 Endurance-class LPDs</p> <p>Joint Multi-Mission Ship on order</p>	<p>4 ex-Swedish A-12 submarines</p> <p>2 ex-Swedish A-17 submarines (w/AIP)</p> <p>2 German Type-218S submarines (w/AIP) on order</p>	<p>24 F-15S fighters</p> <p>74 F-16 Block 52/52+ fighters</p> <p>Partner in Joint Strike Fighter (F-35) program, may acquire up to 100 F-35s</p>	<p>AAMs: AMRAAM, <i>Python IV</i>, AIM-9X</p> <p>ASCM: Harpoon</p> <p>AGM: JSOW, JDAM</p> <p>MRL: HIMARS</p>

Country	Surface Combatants	Amphibious Ships/Aircraft Carriers	Submarines	Combat Aircraft	Missiles & Other Systems
Taiwan	<p>4 ex-<i>Kidd</i>-class destroyers</p> <p>8 <i>Perry</i>-class frigates</p> <p>6 <i>Lafayette</i>-class frigates</p> <p>4 ex-<i>Knox</i>-class frigates, acquired 2000s</p> <p>Building 30 <i>Kuang Hua</i> VI-class FAC(M)</p> <p>Developing <i>Hsun Hai</i> corvette</p>	1 ex- <i>Anchorage</i> -class LSD	Requirement for up to 8 submarines, but acquisition uncertain	<p>150 F-16A/B fighters (being upgraded)</p> <p>60 <i>Mirage</i>-2000 fighters</p> <p>130 locally built <i>Ching-kuo</i> fighters (being upgraded)</p>	<p>AAM: AMRAAM, AIM-9M, <i>MICA</i>, <i>Magic</i> II, <i>Sky Sword</i> I/II</p> <p>AGM: Maverick</p> <p>ASCM: Harpoon, Hsiung Feng II/III</p> <p>MD: PAC-2/-3, <i>Skybow</i> III</p> <p>LACM: Hsiung Feng-IIe</p>
Thailand	2 Chinese-built Type-053 frigates	1 Spanish-built STOVL aircraft carrier, equipped with AV-8A STOVL fighters (inoperable)	Requirement for 2+ submarines	12 <i>Gripen</i> fighters	AAM: AMRAAM
Vietnam	2 Russian-built <i>Gepard</i> -class frigates		Acquiring 6 <i>Kilo</i> -class submarines, with LACM	<p>12 Su-27 fighters</p> <p>36 Su-30MK2V fighters</p>	<p>AAM: R-77</p> <p>ASCM: Kh-35/SS-N-25 <i>Switchblade</i></p>

SOURCE: Compiled by author

Glossary

AAM: air-to-air missile

AGM: air-to-ground munition

AIP: air-independent propulsion

ASCM: antiship cruise missile

DDH: helicopter destroyer

FAC(M): fast-attack craft (missile-carrying)

LACM: land-attack cruise missile

LHD: landing helicopter dock

LPD: land platform dock

MD: missile defence

MRL: multiple-rocket launcher

OPV: offshore patrol vessel

SSM: surface-to-surface missile

SSN: nuclear-powered attack submarine

SSBN: nuclear-powered ballistic-missile submarine

STOVL: short takeoff/vertical landing

USCG: US Coast Guard

