The Chinese militarization of the Spratly and Paracel Islands poses significant threats to joint airpower in the USINDOPACOM region. These actions enhance China’s anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities, making it challenging for U.S. and allied forces to operate freely in the region (Fabian-Lucas Romero Meraner, [China’s Anti-Access/Area-Denial Strategy](https://tdhj.org/blog/post/china-a2ad-strategy/), 2023). China’s development of airstrips, radar installations, and missile systems on these islands enables it to project power deep into the South China Sea, threatening freedom of navigation and overflight. The integration of advanced surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems, anti-ship cruise missiles, and fighter jets creates a layered A2/AD network that complicates access for joint airpower. This militarization threatens regional stability, jeopardizes trade routes, and challenges international norms established under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) ([United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea](https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf), 1982).

To counterbalance these threats, a Joint Force Commander (JFC) must employ contemporary and emerging joint airpower capabilities strategically. First off, leveraging stealth aircraft like the F-35 and B-21 bombers can neutralize China’s A2/AD network (Harry Foster, [The Joint Stealth Task Force: An Operational Concept for Air-Sea Battle](https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/577481/the-joint-stealth-task-force-an-operational-concept-for-air-sea-battle/), 2014). These platforms excel in penetrating heavily defended airspace, conducting precision strikes on critical nodes like SAM sites and command centers while minimizing exposure to Chinese defenses. Second, employing advanced electronic warfare (EW) capabilities is essential to disrupt Chinese radar and communication networks (Yoni Tobin, [U.S. Should Invest In Electronic Warfare As Adversaries Advance](https://jinsa.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/JINSA_Electronic_Warfare_Adversaries_Advance.pdf), 2023). Platforms like the EA-18G Growler can degrade the effectiveness of China’s integrated air defense systems, opening pathways for follow-on air operations. Third, integrating unmanned systems, such as MQ-9 Reapers and emerging autonomous platforms, offers persistence and flexibility. These assets can conduct persistent intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) missions, enhancing situational awareness and targeting precision while reducing risks to human pilots (General Atomics, [MQ-9A "Reaper", Persistent Multi-Mission ISR](https://www.ga-asi.com/remotely-piloted-aircraft/mq-9a), Accessed 2024). Finally, leveraging allied cooperation is crucial. Partnering with regional allies like Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan to establish a distributed network of forward-operating bases and conduct joint exercises demonstrates resolve and enhances interoperability (David Vergun, [Austin Says Regional Alliances Strengthen Indo-Pacific Security](https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3992739/austin-says-regional-alliances-strengthen-indo-pacific-security/), 2024). Deploying air and missile defense systems in allied territories strengthens collective security, ensuring the ability to respond to any escalation. Through a combination of advanced capabilities, multi-domain integration, and robust alliances, a JFC can counter China’s A2/AD strategy, ensuring freedom of navigation and overflight in the USINDOPACOM region while maintaining a credible deterrent to aggression.